



WILDEST DREAMS

NORMAN PARTRIDGE

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by

Norman Partridge

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For Ron Ezell,
a book about the bad guys for one of the good guys....

“But you want me to desecrate the grave!”

“Don’t give me that crap. There’s nothing sacred about a hole in the ground. Or a man that’s in it. Or you, or me.”

—Warren Oates answers Isela Vega in Sam Peckinpah’s *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*

PART ONE:

A COLD & LONELY EVIL

The time has been
That when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again.
With twenty mortal murders on their crown.

—Shakespeare

Macbeth

Act III, Scene II

1

I see ghosts.

This one was a little girl with long blonde hair and a black dress. She sat on a footbridge that arched across a rushing creek, her little girl legs dangling over the side as she gazed down at the cold water rushing below.

I moved toward her, following a fern-choked path through old redwoods, but the little girl didn't notice me. Sometimes it's like that. Sometimes the dead don't see the living at all. Often, in fact. Often ghosts are no more threatening than old movie clips. They're helpless specters fixed in time and place, forever repeating some action whose significance was lost long ago, perhaps even to them.

Of course, my footsteps were light. Maybe that was why I went unnoticed. A rusty blanket of dead redwood needles covered the path, but it wouldn't have mattered if the forest floor was salted with gravel—I can be quiet when I want to. So the sounds I made were hardly sounds at all, and what the little girl would have heard had she been listening was masked by the hollow sigh of clear creek water flowing to the sea.

Masked, until I stepped onto the wooden bridge and my boot heel rang down like a judge's gavel.

The ghost looked up with startled blue eyes that were as clear as the October sky.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I said.

She smiled. "Oh, I wasn't scared. Not truly. I just didn't see you coming. Not many people come here, you know."

"I know."

"You'll be glad you did, though." She nodded toward the creek. "It's a nice place. Sometimes you see fish."

I unslung my backpack and sat down beside her. She moved closer. The nearness of her made me shiver, but I masked my unease with a smile. I didn't want her to think that anything might be wrong.

We sat there in silence. A bower of heavy redwood branches hid the creek, and the bridge, and the living and the dead from the sun. The shadows did

not bother me, and neither did the little girl—there was nothing in her clear October eyes to make me wary, or afraid.

I knew the girl could not say the same of my eyes. But even though I'd frightened her, she hadn't looked away from me. She had studied my eyes as if she were searching for everything that lay behind them, and she hadn't even blinked.

I hadn't looked away, either. Strange. I'd seen ghosts since childhood. Maybe because I was born with a caul—that's the occultist's favorite explanation, anyway. I'd learned to ignore the dead a long time ago. First the dull ones with their endless pantomimes, and later those whose actions were less predictable. By the time I was a teenager, I could spend a night in a room with a wailing spirit and sleep like a baby.

But there was something very different about the little girl. I can't say it any plainer than that. There was a depth to her, an intelligence that was rare in the dead.

An innocence, as well.

It was something I'd never seen before.

Somehow, she seemed very much alive.

And very, very lonely.

I knew what it was like to be lonely.

"Look!" she said suddenly, and her little hand brushed through mine with icy, transparent fingers as she pointed at the creek.

A steelhead shot through the water like a bullet, fighting the current every inch of the way. A flash of scale like living sunshine, a splash of the steelhead's dark and powerful tail, and then it was gone.

The little ghost leaned forward, straining after the fish. "Careful," I said automatically, realizing too late that my concern was ridiculous.

"Don't worry," she said. "I won't fall."

I didn't say anything.

The girl stared upstream and sighed. "Wasn't he beautiful?"

I nodded.

"He's going upstream. They go upstream to spawn."

I nodded again, and she looked at me with those clear, innocent eyes. I wondered if she knew what happened to steelheads after they spawned. I wasn't going to tell her. If she didn't know now, she didn't ever need to know.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Clay Saunders."

“What’s in your backpack, Clay Saunders?”

Watching the fish, I’d actually forgotten about the backpack. Just for a moment. It was black, and it was canvas, and you couldn’t see the bloodstains on it unless you looked really hard

I’d bought the pack in Baja six days before. It sat between us on the bridge. Already, flies were circling it.

I swallowed hard. I’d made a mistake. I didn’t have time for distractions. I should have ignored the little ghost, and taken care of business the way I’d planned, and gone on.

But instead I’d stopped, and now there were questions.

That’s the way it always is.

Anytime you stop, there are questions.

Questions are never good.

Without a word, I rose and slung the pack over one shoulder. I had to laugh at myself. Silly, getting nervous like that. Way past paranoid. After all, it wouldn’t matter if I told the girl what was inside the backpack. She was dead. She wasn’t going to tell anyone.

Still, I didn’t want her to know.

I’d already scared her once, and once was enough.

A fly buzzed around her head. She swatted at it, not noticing as the insect passed through her hand. “You can trust me,” she said. “I know how to keep a secret.”

“So do I, and I promised I’d keep this one all to myself.”

My words weren’t meant to sound harsh, but they did to the little girl. She apologized quickly, and I could tell that she was both embarrassed and ashamed.

“Maybe you can help me,” I said, hoping to smooth things over. “There’s someone I’m supposed to meet, and I think I might have missed them.”

“A boy or a girl?”

“A girl.”

She giggled, at ease now. “Clay’s got a girlfriend.”

“Not quite.” I laughed, but I didn’t like the blush that warmed my face. Even if I was talking to a ghost, I was talking too much.

The girl didn’t notice my discomfort. She stared into the creek, pretending to watch for another fish. But I knew that she was only pretending now. She hadn’t forgotten me, or my backpack, at all.

She couldn’t keep quiet for long. “I’ve been here all day,” she said

finally, “and I haven’t seen any girl. Only you.”

“We’re not supposed to meet here, exactly.” I glanced up at the redwood boughs that hid the sky from view. “I think I’m on the right trail, but I’m a city boy. Put me in the woods and I’m lost.”

“I’m lost, too. At least I think I am. My mom said Daddy would meet me here, but he hasn’t come. It’s been a long time, too. But I just keep waiting, because that’s what my mom told me to do.” She paused, staring at the water. “I don’t mind waiting. Not really. It’s nice here.”

She reached out for my hand.

“We’re alone, just like Hansel and Gretel,” she said, and her voice whispered through the forest like a lonely wind that touches no one. But her fingers were like the wind, too, and though they passed through mine I knew that she had touched me, even if she could not hold my hand.

She kept on trying, though. Without a word. She didn’t give up.

I tried, too. It was like trying to hold a five-fingered breeze. And while I tried, I wondered how long the little girl had been here. Her clothes were hard to place. That little black dress, simple and severe, like something out of *The Addams Family*, but timeless in its way.

Maybe she’d been here a hundred years, or maybe a hundred days. I couldn’t decide. I only knew that as long as she’d been here, she’d been all alone.

I wondered how long it had been since someone had spoken to her. How long since she’d shared a smile or a laugh, or tried to hold someone’s hand.

I didn’t want to ask those questions. Questions are never good.

But there was one question I had to ask. “I’m looking for the bottle house,” I began. “Do you know where it is?”

“Sure.” Her fingers drifted away from mine. “It’s not far.” She seemed to float away. “Follow me.”

I did.

2

“There it is,” the little girl said.

I didn’t see the bottle house at first. There was the ocean to look at, so different from the blue waters that washed the golden beaches of Mexico. Two thousand miles north of Los Cabos, the Pacific was wild and cruel. The coast here was framed by arthritic knots of cypress, gray limbs crippled by winds that were as cold as they were relentless. Iron-colored combers crashed against a beach shaped like a reaper’s scythe. The sand was as dark as freshly poured concrete, and the sound of each wave shook me to the bone.

Just like an ordinary little girl, the ghost scrambled over a fallen redwood. I followed. We threaded our way through knots of bleached driftwood as we crossed the concrete beach. My boots compacted damp sand, but the little girl’s shoes left no mark at all.

A splash of sunlight washed the shoreline and I spotted the bottle house, nestled on the cresting cliff that dropped cleanly into the ocean at the south end of the beach.

I wondered why I’d had trouble finding it. After all, it was exactly where Circe Whistler had said it would be.

The sand slowed me down, but there was no slowing the girl. She started up a narrow trail that climbed the cliff, cutting through heavy underbrush. For a while I lost track of her. I hurried to the trail, picking my way through tall stands of beach grass that hid the girl and the house from view.

I was afraid that she would be gone by the time I reached the house. Sometimes it happened that way. Some ghosts have territories which bind them to a plot of ground the same way fear binds an agoraphobic.

But that’s not the way it was. Not this time. When I reached a set of concrete steps and a twisted wrought iron railing, there she was, waiting on the patio above.

The patio was concrete, too. Beach grass knifed through wide cracks that brought California earthquakes to mind, and I suddenly found myself wondering if we were anywhere close to a fault line.

Another look at the bottle house and I stopped wondering. If this were

earthquake country, the place wouldn't be here at all. Composed almost entirely of old bottles set in concrete, the abandoned structure looked about as stable as a sand castle.

But looks could be deceiving. I knew that the house had stood for nearly forty years, since Circe Whistler's father had cemented the crowning bottle with his own two hands.

Several PRIVATE PROPERTY and NO TRESPASSING signs flapped in the wind, but the house wasn't exactly secure—there was no door at all, only a battered wooden jam with rusting hinges that held nothing but air. The concrete walls were golden brown with white flecks that caught the afternoon light and added to the sand castle impression. The bottles were of every color, their bases facing out from the walls like startled eyes.

A passing cloud eclipsed the sun. A hundred glass eyes closed all at once, and the wind whipped through the open doorway and played in as many glass throats, the sound a terminal inhalation.

"Some people think this place is haunted," the girl whispered.

"People believe a lot of strange things."

She hesitated, drawing close. "I don't want to go inside."

"You don't have to."

"I will." She looked up at me, a trembling smile on her face. "If you come with me."

* * *

"Do you suppose your girlfriend is late?"

"Anything's possible." We were inside now, and I wasn't surprised to find that the house's interior was just as unusual as the exterior. The flagstone floor rose and fell at funhouse angles, throwing off my sense of balance. There was no furniture at all, only a pile of dry tinder heaped near an empty fireplace as if a group of kids had decided to have a party in the ruin only to think better of it as night closed around them.

It seemed a reasonable explanation. Even in the daylight, there was no escaping the spectral wind that played in the open bottles. It sounded like a dying man wheezing through glass lungs. If that kind of thing got to you, it would certainly get to you here. And good.

"No one ever lived here," the girl said. "Not truly."

"I can see why."

The child nodded, staying close to the door. "My mom said this place was like a church. She said there were always people here. Even when it was empty."

I smiled. "You mean ghosts?"

"I don't know. I only know that what my mom said scared me. I don't like creepy places, and I don't like creepy stories. I guess I'm just a scaredy cat."

"Stories are just stories," I said. "They can't hurt you."

I might have said more, but that was when I heard the flies.

Trapped inside the bottles, buzzing to be free.

I stared at the wall of glass. A few corked bottles, but most were open. Narrow throats and wide throats. Lips polished and dirty, cracked and smooth...but no flies.

Not yet.

But soon. That was a certainty. Because I had what the flies wanted. They had scented the bloody thing in my backpack.

I couldn't wait to be rid of that thing, and all that came with it, and all that it attracted.

Flies...and a woman named Circe Whistler.

The woman I'd come to meet. But I wouldn't wait for Circe here. I'd wait outside, and I'd take the little girl with me.

"Let's go," I said, and that was when I noticed that the little girl was already gone.

I took a step back and my heel struck an uneven stone in the floor. It seemed to wobble underfoot, or maybe it was me who wobbled, but the end result was the same. I nearly lost my balance.

The first fly brushed past my cheek.

If I waited another minute, I'd be crawling with the things.

I turned, a chill of disgust capering up my spine.

A woman blocked my way.

* * *

I only knew two things about the woman: she wasn't afraid of flies, and she wasn't Circe Whistler.

"I was expecting someone else," I said.

"Plans change," she said. "Life is fluid."

"Life is clockwork. Or it should be."

“Maybe where you come from, but things are different here. Anyway, I didn’t mean to give you such a start.”

She smiled. Blonde and slight, but she didn’t look at all weak. And the way she held onto her amused expression reminded me of some smartass kid who’d just spotted a zipper on Godzilla’s back.

We stood outside, away from the flies. The little girl was nowhere in sight, and I was surprised to find that I was worried about her. I couldn’t help wondering if she’d seen the woman, if this stranger had scared her off—

“What’s wrong?” the blonde asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I stared at her. Maybe she’d seen the little girl and was being coy with me. Maybe she hadn’t. I couldn’t decide—her eyes were flat and cold, like the ocean.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I asked.

“I believe in many things. For instance, I believe that the bottle house is a place of intense energies. Both positive and negative. Souls dwell here. I’ve spoken to them.”

“Really,” I said, doing my best to sound diplomatic. But my new age radar was going up, and going up fast. The last thing I needed was a lecture on energies, or dynamics or—

“Faith is the key, of course,” she said. “This place was a temple, you know. A place of *intense* faith. And faith is power. *Intense* power. Don’t you agree?”

“I’m getting the all-over heebie-jeebies just thinking about it.” I bit off the remark as fast as I could and held out my hand, one last stab at diplomacy. “Clay Saunders.”

She looked at my hand like I’d offered her a bug on a silver platter. “Forgive me if I don’t shake.”

“I’m sure you have your reasons. Energies, dynamics...like that.”

“My name is Janice Ravenwood,” she said, ignoring the jab. “I’m a medium. Perhaps you know my books.”

“No. But then, I stick mostly to nonfiction.”

“I think I’m full up with sarcasm now.”

“I’m not being sarcastic. It’s just the way I am. I only believe what I see.”

“You see what you choose to see.” She raised her hand. “It’s all a matter of energies.” Her fingers did a little dance, and the silver bracelets encircling her thin wrists provided the music. “If you had a sensitive nature—I’m speaking psychically, of course—you’d understand. You’d see beyond the physical, as I

do.”

“The physical suits me just fine,” I said, nudging the backpack with my shoulder. “Let’s stick with it.”

“As you wish.”

“Run down the plan for me.”

“You bring your backpack. I bring you. We go to the Whistler estate. You meet a few people. From there on out, you’re on your own.”

“Sounds familiar,” I said. I looked around, searching for spectral company, but the little girl was nowhere in sight. “Seems like I’m always on my own.”

Janice Ravenwood stared at the backpack. She didn’t say a word, but her smile knifed into a smirk.

And then she slipped a pair of dark glasses over her gray eyes, and the sun broke through the clouds behind her, and light caught the bottles and a dozen colors were reflected in the polished lenses of her shades.

She turned and started down the trail before I could say another word.

I followed in silence.

* * *

The medium’s Ford Explorer was parked on the beach. “Give me your pack,” she said. “I’ll toss it in the back.”

“I’ll hold onto it, if that’s okay.”

Janice sighed disapprovingly. “Have it your way.”

“Sorry. I have issues. Trust is one of them.”

She laughed, but a wave broke behind her and I hardly heard the laugh at all.

In a moment, nothing remained of the wave but a crust of foam sizzling high on the beach.

“Let’s go,” Janice said.

I got in and buckled my seat belt. The beach was empty—still no sign of the little girl. I sat there with the pack at my feet. Janice Ravenwood got behind the wheel and slammed the door. She keyed the engine, slipped the Explorer into gear, and drove down the beach. Waves broke, but we were sealed in tight and I couldn’t hear them anymore. Just an annoying whisper of new age music coming from the stereo, and the sound of our breathing.

And a fly.

The insect must have followed us inside. It buzzed around the cab and lighted just where I knew it would, on the backpack.

I stared at it. Crawling, fat and black and shiny. Stopping. Rubbing its legs together. Janice Ravenwood saw it too.

She stopped the car and leaned toward me so that her hair brushed my shoulder. In close, I could smell her perfume.

Vanilla-sweet, with a hint of jasmine. It went just fine with the new age music.

Her fingers neared the backpack, but didn't quite touch it.

Our eyes met. Just for a moment. Janice gave a little sigh, only vaguely theatrical.

Energies, I thought, considering the backpack's contents. *They must be thermonuclear.*

It seemed like Janice knew that too. Though her fingers were close, she didn't touch the backpack.

She was a very patient woman. She turned her hand palm upward, ever so slowly, so that her silver bracelets didn't make the slightest sound.

We sat there. We sat there a good long time.

Until the fly crawled across Janice Ravenwood's fingers, into her open palm.

Just that fast, her hand became a fist.

She rolled down her window and released the fly.

"Your good deed for the day?" I asked.

She said, "A wise soul understands the dynamics of mercy."

For a few seconds we sat there, listening to the waves and the music, smelling the salt air. I guess she thought I needed a little downtime for processing.

Finally, Janice Ravenwood rolled up her window.

She glared at my backpack.

"We really should have put that thing in the back," she said. "It stinks."

* * *

The beach gave way to a dirt road that snaked through the redwood forest. We followed that road awhile, past the clearing where I'd parked my truck, and then the dirt road intersected with a two-lane highway that clung to the ragged coastline the same way the bottle house did, as if it might tumble into

the sea at any moment.

Janice was right about the backpack. It did stink. I cracked my window and breathed the scent of redwood and fern and sea and earth.

Occasionally, another road led inland through the trees. Occasionally, I glimpsed a house set back among the redwoods, but more often than not there was only the forest itself, as impenetrable as the walls of a fortress.

Maybe it was the presence of Janice Ravenwood, girl medium, but I suddenly considered the possibility that anything could happen in a place like this.

Anything, in the dark shadows cast by trees that were centuries old.
Anything, in the black places where no one could see.

Anything. It was quite a concept for a guy like me.

A guy like me didn't do too well with *anything*. I did better with *nothing*.
That was a concept I could sink my teeth into.

Nothing in the shadows but blackness.

Nothing in the light but what you could see.

Yeah. I could get a hold of that one. After all, I could see more than most.
And what I saw didn't stretch halfway to the boundless possibilities of *anything*.

Janice pulled off the highway. Tires shushed along a cobbled drive that wound toward the sea. We descended into the trees, and the shadows. As we left the light, Janice flicked on her headlights.

And we saw what there was to see.

A hundred yards of security fencing flashed by on the left. A spiked iron gate. A guard dog.

The dog had three heads, and three open mouths filled with gleaming fangs.

But the dog was bronze. It didn't move.

"There's a security box to the left of the gate," Janice said. "The code is *666*. Circe said to trust you with it, but I can't imagine why."

"Thanks."

"One other thing."

"What's that?"

She smiled. "Watch out for dogs."

"I'll do my best," I said, shooting a glance at the bronze statue. "But to tell the truth, I don't have much of an imagination."

"Hang around a while," Janice said. "We'll make a believer of you yet."

I closed the door and watched the medium drive away. Then I punched in

the security code and waited for the gate to open.

A fly buzzed by me.

Another one, or the same one.

It flew between spiked iron bars, and into the darkness. And beyond.

3

The security gate swung closed behind me.

A narrow brick path curved to the right, leading to another gate and another keypad. Janice hadn't mentioned the added security, but it didn't surprise me. After all, this was Circe Whistler's home. I imagined she'd made some pretty formidable enemies in her time. To be sure, there was a fine line between careful and paranoid. But if I were Circe Whistler, I probably would have jumped across it a long time ago.

I reached for the keypad and a Doberman sprang from the shadows on the other side of the gate, raking its teeth across the bars and barking up a storm.

Three other dogs joined it in the time it took me to draw a breath. Squinting into the shadows, I saw that the gate led to a large enclosed pen. I shook my head—right about now, Janice Ravenwood was probably having a good laugh at my expense.

I looked for another way to go, and that was when I noticed a brick staircase half-hidden by braided vines. Brushing them to one side like tattered draperies, I descended through a lush jungle of ferns and orchids and hanging fuchsias to a swimming pool with a black bottom.

Black, to trap the heat of the sun and warm the water. But the sun was weak here. A ring of ancient redwoods snared the pool, transforming the day to muted twilight, and the water was as dark as the mythic Styx.

Something flashed beneath the water's surface and caught my eye. Silver ripples broke at the opposite end of the pool, parting the water in a sculpted wake behind armored ridges of blue scale, sharp teeth parted over hellish smiles, and bright red gouts of blood that never flowed. All of it there on the surface for just a moment, and then came the slightest splash and the silver water closed around the thing as it submerged, moving as swift and strong as the steelhead in the little girl's creek.

Whatever it was, it was coming in my direction. Coming very fast.

The water parted at the edge of the pool. White hands with painted black nails slapped the coping and a woman thrust palm down and carried her weight up and out of the water in one smooth motion, her arms straight now, silver

water rolling down tattooed tapestries on her bare shoulders—armored ridges of blue scale, sharp teeth parted over hellish smiles, and bright red gouts of blood that never flowed.

The tattoos must have cost a lot. I figured that was the reason Circe Whistler didn't want to cover them with a swimming suit.

Circe's lips pulled back in a smile as she noticed me. She slicked long, too-black hair against her skull and twisted a final splash of water from it.

Like the payoff scare in a monster movie, another splash chopped the silence. Another pair of black-nailed hands on the coping, but but this time it was a man who came out of the water. At least I thought Circe's companion was a man. I had my doubts—I'd never seen another like him. With a shaved bullet-head and long muscled arms he rose from the depths...with crude brands burned on his pale skin like souvenirs of hell...and it seemed he just kept coming, naked and grub white and breathing like a bellows.

Circe teased the tall freak. "You need to work on your stamina."

"Try me on land next time." He panted. "Exclusively—no more of this amphibian shit."

Circe moved in and kissed the Egyptian ankh branded on his chest. Then she strained high on tiptoes and he bent down, and at last her lips found his. They embraced, and when they came apart I found myself thinking of the steelhead swimming upstream to spawn in the little girl's creek.

But that was ridiculous. Circe Whistler was a beauty scaled with tattoos, but her companion didn't much resemble a graceful creature of the water. I didn't know exactly where he belonged, but the biped act he was attempting definitely seemed an evolutionary challenge. Awkward and insectile and at least seven feet tall, he carried a lean gym-sculpted torso on a pair of skinny legs that looked like they should collapse under the weight. As far as I was concerned, the ugly bastard broke about a dozen laws of nature. He looked like he belonged under a rock.

He gave me the once-over as he dried off. "This the guy?" he asked, and I could tell by his tone that he was almost as impressed as I was.

"Yes. This is the guy." Circe snatched a towel from a chaise lounge and dried herself, but her eyes never left me. Not the bright blue pair set in the savage angles of her face, not the others that stared out from the faces of demons and children and monsters etched on her flesh.

"Toss me my robe?" she asked.

It hung over a railing at the bottom of the staircase. The freak headed for

it. His legs were longer, but I was closer. Besides, he was still panting like a sled dog heading for the Iditarod finish line. By the time he got to the railing, I was holding the robe in my left hand.

Empty-handed, the bugman looked way past distressed.

“You can always take this,” I said, extending the backpack.

“Get that fucking thing away from me.”

He said it too quickly. I had him on the run, and I knew it. I jammed the backpack against the branded ankh on his chest.

Wasn’t that a laugh—the Egyptian symbol of eternal life. “Do you really think you’re going to live forever?” I asked. The bugman’s upper lip started to twitch.

“Now boys,” Circe said. “Play nice, or I won’t let you play at all.”

The whole thing was a joke now. I grinned and slung the backpack over my shoulder, and the freak grabbed a fistful of my right hand, his big hand swallowing mine like an albino spider.

He shook my hand like he wanted to break it. I let him have his fun. “Spider Ripley,” he said.

“Clay Saunders.”

Ripley eyed me hard. But when he released my hand, he didn’t have anything. I still had the backpack, and Circe’s robe.

The robe was silk. I liked touching it. It hardly weighed a thing. I turned my back on Spider Ripley, and Circe turned her back on me when I came near. Another horror movie scare—scales and tentacles and more eyes tattooed on the sleek, muscled plain of her back.

Circe held out her arms and I blinded the monsters, covering her in black silk. She looked better in silk. Her pool time had bought her strong swimmer’s shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist. The hem of the robe fell just under her ass, and the long legs that carried her were white and pure, as surprising as an unmarked canvas hanging in a museum. She wore no tattoos from heel to thigh, but her legs held my attention just the same.

Circe knotted the sash around her waist. “Did everything go all right?”

“I finished the job,” I said.

“Wonderful,” she said.

It wasn’t like we were talking about murder at all.

* * *

We entered the house. Spider Ripley went to dress. Circe didn't. She seemed perfectly comfortable in her silk robe, and I was perfectly comfortable with her in it.

She led me to a large living room. A peaked wall of windows faced west. The view was beyond spectacular, only slightly marred by the barred security fence that surrounded the entire property.

Beyond the fence, the Pacific gleamed like a mirror under the setting sun. Jagged cliffs carved by wind and rain dropped to a beach hidden from view by the twisted skeletons of stunted cypress trees, but I had no feeling for the wind that had maimed them. All was still within the house.

There was no wind here at all. Still, the room was as tortured as the trees outside, the difference being that the room had been twisted by man. A circular staircase rose in one corner, writhing with barbed wrought iron railings. Lights grew on spiked steel stems. The walls and furniture were fashioned from carved redwood that was as dead as coffin wood, its live, earthy smell now no more than a faded rumor.

But there was life here, if you were willing to look for it. A bonsai tree sat on a low glass table, its limbs tortured by cunning twists of wire, harnessed just as brutally as the dead things.

The house exuded male pheromones, and I was willing to bet that they didn't belong to Spider Ripley. Circe Whistler was the owner here, but her father had put his mark on this place and it was as indelible as the mark of the beast. Diabolos Whistler's daughter could not erase it or cover it over with her own mark, try as she might. Circe's father had claimed to be Satan's successor, had built a cult with temples spread as far as Paris and Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro, and even in death his presence was as unavoidable as the ripe black stench of decay.

I could feel it.

And I could smell it.

I opened the backpack and placed Diabolos Whistler's severed head on the glass table, next to the bonsai tree. The cult leader's face wore a twisted expression frozen somewhere between a sneer and a smile, but no length of cunning wire had trained it.

I had trained Whistler's death grin.

I had done the job with a seven-inch U.S. Army K-bar knife.

"Fucking hell." Circe's nose wrinkled. "Couldn't you have kept it on ice or something?"

It was the wrong thing to say. I took a deep breath, and the stink of death burned in my lungs. Circe smiled as if she'd made a joke, but I wasn't laughing. Not after what I'd gone through. I wasn't laughing at all.

I should have kept my mouth shut. I should have held that stinking breath in my lungs and not said a word. But I couldn't do that.

"I didn't much notice the stink," I said. "Maybe because I stink, too. The last shower I had was at a hotel in Baja. That was four days ago. I drove straight through. I would have made it back sooner, but that would have meant flying, and I don't think the folks at AeroMexico would have allowed my carry-on luggage. I bought a Toyota truck off some surf bum for the trip back. Paid way too much for it. It didn't even have air-conditioning.

"Your father had it tougher, though. When I crossed the border, I duct-taped his head to the differential. That's how he got the grease spot on his forehead and the burn mark on his cheek. But I don't figure it bothered him much. He was already dead."

"Okay," Circe said. "Okay—"

"I just wanted you to know that I earned my money."

"It appears that you did." Circe knelt and stared into her father's eyes. Her expression was completely clinical, almost as serious as the one she'd worn on the cover of *Newsweek*.

"We'll be running tests, you understand," she said. "My father loved going to the doctor. The dentist, too. His medical records are nauseatingly detailed."

"You act like I made this thing out of papier-mâché or something."

"My father started using doubles after he received his first death threats back in the Haight-Ashbury days. That was thirty years ago. Some of them were nearly identical, right down to the tattoos." She leaned closer to the head, staring into those dead eyes. "All I'm saying is that I have to be sure. You can understand that. After all, we're talking about a lot of money."

"You never said anything about doubles. As far as I'm concerned, I fulfilled my contract. I killed the man who lived in Diabolos Whistler's mansion in Los Cabos. I returned with his head, as per your instructions. Apart from the transportation problem, it was a fairly easy job. Your father was right where you said he'd be. He was all alone, unless you want to count those mummies stacked like so much cordwood in his library. If you want to know the details, he went pretty easy. I came up from behind and stabbed him just above the first vertebra. He gasped a little bit. Then he started mewling. It didn't last more than a second

or two, but it was enough to make an impression. To tell you the truth, he sounded more like a newborn babe than a seventy-three-year-old master of occult sciences.”

Circe didn't say a word. I took a deep breath. “After I cut off your father's head, I stacked his body on top of the mummy collection in the library. That's where the Mexican police found him. According to the papers, they're investigating a number of leads. If you ask me, they're investigating how quickly they can sweep the whole matter under the carpet. The last thing they want is to find your father's head, let alone his killer. Mexico is a very religious county. Diabolos Whistler's death has generated a shitload of negative publicity. The politicians who facilitated your father's move south of the border aren't eager to be exposed to their countrymen. I'm sure the little weasels are already in touch with your father's lawyers. Matters will be settled in short order, and soon enough you'll have a big fat inheritance to squander any way you please—”

“That's enough.”

“It might be for you, but it's not for me. If you don't want to hear about it, pay me.” I grinned. “That'll shut me up.

“Tests first. Money later.”

“I guess you like the sound of my voice.”

“Really, it won't take long. Spider will take the head to San Francisco this afternoon—”

“Ripley's taking it? Looked to me like he didn't want any part of that thing.”

“Spider *is* a true believer.” Circe smiled. “But he does what he's told.”

“He's an idiot.”

“Draw your own conclusions.”

“It's just that I'm a strong believer in first impressions.”

She cocked an eyebrow and waited.

“If you're waiting to hear my first impression of you,” I said, “I think I'll keep that to myself.”

“As you wish.” She returned her attention to the head. “At any rate, the preliminary dental exam should be completed by midnight. There are a few other formalities that you don't need to worry about. But if all goes well, you'll have your money by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow afternoon I wanted to be on a beach.”

“There are beaches here.”

“I was thinking of the tropics.”

“Believe me, I can understand your impatience.” She shrugged. “But the tropics will have to wait.”

“And in the meantime?”

“At the top of the stairs, you’ll find a guest room. There’s a shower. I suggest you make use of it. There’s a bed, too. It’s comfortable. You can have a nap. Later we’ll have dinner. Just the two of us.”

I thought it over. A shower...a nap...dinner...it didn’t sound so bad.

She laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Saunders. But I’ve never had this much trouble convincing a man to spend time with me.”

“It’s not you.” I nodded at Diabolos Whistler’s severed head. “It’s him. I’m a little tired of his company.”

“I know the feeling,” she said.

I started up the circular staircase. A shower would be good. Really long. Really hot. I wanted to be clean.

I wondered what Circe Whistler wanted. I’d struck a nerve when I mentioned her inheritance, but I knew that she was after more than a few extra zeros at the end of her bank balance. One look at the house and I knew that she already had more than enough money.

I could see right through Spider Ripley. Just like he was a window. A first impression was all it took with a guy like that. Spider Ripley was all slot A in tab B, until he fit together like a kid’s toy. But Circe Whistler was something else. A puzzle box. The kind the Japanese made. The kind you couldn’t open unless someone showed you how.

I watched her through spiked wrought iron bars as I walked along the landing above the living room. Watched her black nails rake Diabolos Whistler’s long white mane. Watched her fingers curl into a fist. Watched her raise her father’s severed head, and watched it sway at her side as she disappeared down a dark corridor of redwood and stone, leaving only the sound of Diabolos Whistler’s bristling goatee brushing her naked thigh with every step she took.

“We’re alone, just like Hansel and Gretel.”

That voice again, like a lonely wind that touches no one.

I jerked awake, but there was no little girl ghost with long blonde hair and a black dress. Only Circe, her raven hair spilling over shoulders inked with scales and blood, demons’ leers and children’s tears.

“You were dreaming,” she said.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and just as I realized that her hand was on top of mine it whispered away over black satin sheets and was gone.

I’d slept away the afternoon. Outside, stars salted the black sky, but there was no moon. In the bedroom, spears of feeble yellow light fought a losing battle with the shadows, abandoning us to the dark.

Somewhere in the house, someone was crying. Very, very softly. Fragile, feminine sobs that were somehow out of place, like a sliver of dream under the skin of reality.

Circe didn’t seem to hear the crying at all. Or maybe I had imagined it—another moment and the sound was gone.

I looked into Circe’s eyes, twin chips of cold blue ice. Certainly no tears gleamed there. I wondered if she ever cried.

I doubted it. Crying would redden her eyes, and red eyes didn’t have anything to do with the image Circe Whistler wanted to project. Red eyes were for demons and monsters. But blue eyes could be many things—cool and intelligent, alluring and hypnotic, enticing as they were mysterious. Maybe that was the secret of Circe’s gaze. Not the destructive power of a Medusa, but a vampire’s stare that reflected its victim’s deepest desires.

What you wanted to see in those eyes, you could. And yet I wondered how it was for Circe, living behind those eyes, staring out from a place deep inside herself.

I didn’t know for sure. Not yet. There was no way I could know. But I thought it was as cold as it was dark, and very quiet, that place inside.

Circe rose from the bed and followed a slim shaft of light that spilled through the bedroom doorway.

“Dinner’s waiting,” she said. “Don’t be long.”

* * *

Dinner was rack of lamb. If Circe wanted to gauge my sense of irony, it was a little much. Still, I restrained myself. I left it to her to joke about the meat coming off an altar in a catacomb of hell’s own kitchen, conveniently located just below the dining room.

The line was more Elvira than Oscar Wilde, but she played it all right. But if Diabolos Whistler’s daughter was trying to sell self-deprecation, I wasn’t buying. This woman knew what she wanted and how to get it. One look at her and any idiot could see that.

There was more to it than a pair of alluring blue eyes. Circe wore a dress scooped low in the back that might have been revealing on anyone else. On Circe, the dress was a threat. Snakeskin material clung to her like a second skin, but what the dress didn’t cover was more dangerous than any reptile. The tattooed creature on Circe’s back was her father’s most fearsome demigod—Korthes’h, all tentacles and teeth, a servant of Satan crowned with a dozen eyes gleaming with soulless fire.

The tattoo was just the kind of thing that could ruin a man’s appetite, but I didn’t have to look at it while I ate. We faced each other across a long dining table. Spiked wrought-iron candlesticks stood under a chandelier that looked like a torture device looted from Torquemada’s dungeon.

The lamb was good, and so was the wine. We finished a bottle of Merlot, and Circe opened a Cabernet Sauvignon. The sound of wine splashing crystal was pleasant, almost as pleasant as Circe’s voice. She was trying so hard to be something she wasn’t, and it was real work for her. I could tell she wasn’t used to it.

“Do you like the wine?” she asked solicitously.

I tried it. “It’s a little sharp, but I like it. Especially since you’re paying for it.”

“What you really like is money. Am I right?”

“Not the money so much. I like what it can do for me.”

“These days it goes pretty fast, doesn’t it? There never seems to be enough.”

“I do all right,” I said. “Of course, I’m not running the world’s largest satanic church. I’ve got it a little easier than you do. I’ve got my own tools, and

my business is low overhead.”

“Mine isn’t. The more you have, the more you need. Unexpected problems come up. It’s hard to find motivated people to deal with them.”

“I had the impression you weren’t hurting in that department.”

“Oh?”

“Spider Ripley. The way he puts it on, he’s the man when it comes to bad business hereabouts.”

Circe laughed. “Spider’s all right. I found him through my sister, Lethe. She met Spider at a club in San Francisco. One of those places where people take to the dance floor armed with broken bottles and razor blades. Spider saved her ass, and she hired him on the spot. First he was her bodyguard, and now he’s mine.”

She paused, as if I needed time to read between the lines. I only shrugged. “I must have missed the *Enquirer* that week,” I said. “But I think I follow you.”

“Beyond matters of sibling rivalry, Spider is very good at what he does. In fact, he rarely has to do much at all. Physical size tends to intimidate most people.”

“So do scars. The guy looks like fifty miles of bad road. I especially like that ankh branded on his chest.”

“Before we met him, Spider belonged to an Egyptian revival cult. So it really wasn’t much of a stretch to get him to convert to the gospel according to Diabolos Whistler—my father hijacked a good bit of his theology from the Egyptians.”

“Well, I know the old man had a thing for mummies. He kind of looked like one, too. Your big bad bodyguard certainly could have handled him easily. You’d have saved some money, if nothing else.”

Circe sipped Cabernet Sauvignon. “Looks can be deceiving. I considered Spider for the Mexico job. The idea flitted through my head for a full five seconds. And then I realized that he wouldn’t have the stones for it.”

“Why not?”

“Like I said—Spider is a true believer. Alive, my father frightened him. Dead, he terrifies the poor boy.”

I had to laugh at that.

“That’s why I hired you, Mr. Saunders. You’re not afraid.”

“Not of anything I can’t see.”

“Neither am I. And I see things pretty clearly. Take the future. Mine is an

organization on the move. With my father out of the way and me at the helm, we'll be more than just another cult. We'll be an accepted religion."

"That's the buzz, all right. You're definitely in the news. You looked good on the cover of *Newsweek*, by the way. Not as good as you look tonight, but more professional. Corporate goth girl, all the way."

"They wanted leather. Crushed velvet was a compromise. More feminine. I didn't want to scare off my target audience."

"*The New Hedonism*." I chuckled. "That should nail the sofa set right between the eyes. And that sidebar on Anton Lavey and Jayne Mansfield. Wow."

"It's a start."

"And I'm sure you'll go far with it. L. Ron Hubbard meets Vampiria. It's gotta sell."

Circe blinked a couple times and tried for a smile, but her lips trembled and she lost it.

I swallowed my laughter.

She said, "You can be very cruel, you know."

She was right about that. I could be cruel. But I was a lot rougher with a K-bar than I was with my mouth.

I had my reasons, sure. Everyone has reasons for the things they do. But in my opinion I was an amateur in the cruelty department compared to the people who hired me. Not that I gave myself a pass for the things I did. Not that it mattered to me. To tell the truth, I didn't think about it much. Morality, that was just one of life's little intangibles as far as I was concerned. Everyone had a different view of it, a result of the traps life had thrown their way.

Life had set a trap or two for me. As a result, I had a view that was different than most.

Remember, I see things differently.

I see ghosts.

I, of all people, knew exactly what I was doing with my knife. Shorn of a pulse, most of my victims didn't seem that much different. They didn't sprout wings, and they didn't grow horns. They simply endured.

But I'll tell you this—without the money, I wouldn't have killed anyone. I wouldn't have had a reason.

Circe Whistler had hired me to cut off the head of an old man who happened to be her father. But unlike so many others, she didn't dismiss me when the job was done. She invited me into her home. Sat down to dinner with me. Poured me a glass of wine.

She stared into my eyes, and she didn't blink first. One thing I was sure about—trembling smiles weren't her style. Not this corporate goth girl. I didn't buy it for a second.

I said, "You don't believe any of it, do you?"

"What?"

"The things your old man preached. All that stuff about a new satanic age coming on the heels of his death. *And the ruin of Whistler's corpse shall be Satan's cradle, and Satan will be reborn in flesh and blood to walk the earth once more—*"

"You've been doing your homework, Mr. Saunders."

"Hanging around airports, you have plenty of time to read. Not just *Newsweek*. You run into all sorts of interesting folks who are eager to share all sorts of interesting pamphlets."

"More true believers." Circe sighed. "Look, this is a job to me. Some people put on suits and ties and run corporations. They tell their stockholders what the morons want to hear. I put on black leather and run a religion."

"Crushed velvet," I corrected. "Remember your target audience."

"Have your little joke."

"Like they say: the devil is in the details."

"No—the devil is in the bottom line." She leaned forward, her voice strong and sure. "My father lost sight of that. He pissed away a fortune on archaeological expeditions and medieval manuscripts, looking to verify his prophecies. And my sister was no better. San Francisco was Lethe's vampire. Forget razor blades and broken glass on the dance floor—from the Haight to the Mission, every human leech in that town had her marked for blood. Our operation was poised on the brink of a sinkhole called debt, and my father and my sister were determined to shove us over the edge."

"Well, I guess you're down to one problem, then."

"No. The way I see it, I've turned a negative into a positive. Now my father will be my ace in the hole." She laughed, shaking her head. "My father created his own fucking mythos. Now he'll be part of it. Imagine the questions—is he really dead, is he really alive, has he been reborn as Satan? I can play to that. Don't think I won't. People love a good mystery. Like Jim Morrison—"

"No mystery there. Morrison died choking on his own vomit in a bathtub in Paris. And your old man died with seven inches of steel jammed through his neck. It's all pretty simple, as far as I'm concerned. Dead is dead."

Fire shone in Circe's icy blue eyes. Blood pumped under that cool marble

skin, lighting up her tattoos. Her breaths came short and fast. I knew she was fighting it, because she wanted to maintain control.

But all the signs were there.

She was getting angry...and so was I.

She said, "You're the kind of man who likes to be right, aren't you?"

"Sure."

"I like to be right, too. And I'm right about my father. He may be dead, but he's coming back. Not by supernatural means, and not as a result of the prayers that spilled over his lips or the lips of his followers. None of that will bring him back."

"Then what will?"

"Me," Circe said. "I'll bring him back. I can do that. Not with magic, but with words and lies that don't mean a thing." She sipped her wine, pausing for effect. "You see, we're not that different, Mr. Saunders. We can't be fooled with pretty words. We require proof. To us, dead *is* dead, until someone shows us otherwise. We both know that the only real power my father had was the power people gave him through their misguided faith."

"And now those same people will give that power to you."

"Yes. Those people, and many more just like them."

"And you'll give them what they want."

"Yes."

"The same way your father did." I shook my head. "Maybe the old man wasn't quite as stupid as you think."

It jerked her around good, but she wasn't about to crumble. Not as a result of a few harsh words, no matter how well placed they were. She said, "You really aren't afraid of anything, are you, Mr. Saunders?"

"Like I said—nothing I can see." I grabbed the wine bottle, figuring I'd better quit while I was ahead. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed."

She smiled, and this time her lips didn't tremble at all. "You slept this afternoon. You're not tired now. Not at all."

"I'm not?"

"No, you're not." She paused. "But you are going to bed."

* * *

Circe was right. I wasn't tired. Not at all.

We fucked in her bedroom. The room itself was a bit of a surprise.

Leather was in short supply, and the dusty cat o' nine tails on the wall seemed more of a joke than anything else. If there were chains, I didn't see them.

And if I didn't see them, I figured they weren't there at all. Circe Whistler wasn't the kind of woman who closeted her desires. Open your eyes, open your senses, and you couldn't avoid them. Her desires were everywhere: wrapped in an excess of satin and crushed velvet bedding—violet and lavender and black—and stoppered in bottles along with heady oils of sandalwood and neroli and a dozen scents I didn't recognize.

Blankets and sheets were drawn back. Bottles were unstoppered. Oils beaded on our bodies, beaded with our sweat and the liquor of sex, a wild mix that brought our flesh alive in startling and unexpected ways.

No matter what we did, I couldn't escape the room. Like the rest of the house, Circe's father had left his mark here, too. Spiked wrought-iron fixtures dominated, from the lamps to the bedposts. Even Circe's bed had once belonged to Diabolos Whistler himself.

The devil's own bed. At least that was what Whistler believed. I couldn't imagine the things the dead man had done in it, and the things that had gone through his head while he'd done them. Filling women with his seed while he waited for a birth that could only come from his own death.

I wondered what kinds of questions he asked himself in the darkest hours, in the quiet that came after those women were fast asleep.

Belief or denial...faith or delusion...none of it mattered anymore.

I'd answered Diabolos Whistler's questions with my knife.

The old man was dead. He hadn't come back. Not in spirit, and not in flesh.

So much for metaphysics. I concentrated on Circe. She guided me, swallowed me, sucked me in with two sets of lips, two mouths wet and pink and as seductive as heroin. Whistler's daughter was young and strong. Through the long night we rode riptides of passion and anger and lust and need, driving to the rhythm of two dark hearts.

I worked her as hard as she worked me. I drank her, and I kissed her silken white neck, and I rolled her on her knees and made reins of her long dark hair. I nipped at the demon faces leering on her belly and licked the tentacled monster on her back with a hungry tongue, daring the soulless demigod to come alive.

Candles burned against the darkness. Black wax spilled over wrought iron candlesticks and pooled and grew hard, and red wax droplets covered the

hard ebony pools.

Black candles that burned now, and the ghosts of red candles that had burned in the past.

I didn't want to, but I saw them all.

I didn't want to, but I saw everything.

And more. The dusty cat o' nine tails mounted on the wall gleamed with fresh blood. For now the dead were here.

They came to watch us, Diabolos Whistler's women, ghosts with memories of nights uncounted in this room and this house. A misplaced flower child with a lashed daisy on her cheek and horror in her eyes screamed warnings at us. A much younger girl with kohled eyes sat clutching herself in a corner, wearing nothing but a torn black T-shirt and cigarette burns on her white thighs. And then there was the blonde chained between the bedposts at the foot of the bed, begging to join us.

No chains restrained her. Not anymore, but she couldn't realize that. She was dead, underground in a box somewhere if she was lucky, and she would never touch living flesh again. But she begged for a touch or a kiss, and only Circe's living moans and pleas could eclipse those of the dead woman.

One night I might join the dead. One night I might be here, in this room, as insubstantial as a sigh that comes in the darkest hours.

But not tonight. Tonight I was alive, and all I wanted was Circe—blood pounding through her veins, heart thundering, breaths coming hard and fast. She didn't see the shackled blonde at the foot of the bed. She didn't see the ghosts that had been condemned to this room by a tryst with her father. And I didn't want to see them. All I wanted was the two of us, purging those raw emotions that drew us to Circe's bed. All I wanted was to gather her in tides of black velvet that would take us deeper and deeper to a dark, empty place where we could be alone when the blackest hour closed around us.

But the dead came, more of them now, came closer, the dead who could endure pains born long ago that were never tempered by time, they came clawing at us through night and velvet and satin. So hungry, driven by urges they couldn't understand or forget, trying to grasp the life that pounded and surged within us, fumbling with fingers that could not touch us and kissing with lips we could not feel. For their lips were now dust, and their fingers were shorn of flesh, and they were now the most desperate of lovers, driven by the empty impotence of the grave.

I told myself that I was alive and they were dead.

We were not the same. Not at all.

I almost believed it. I closed my eyes. I would not see them. I pulled the blankets close. I would not feel them. I would only feel Circe.

And I would only hear Circe. Not the lies she spoke across a dinner table, but her stripped moans and naked gasps of pleasure.

And the savage drumbeat of her heart.

In the light of morning, the hungry ghosts were gone. So was Circe. But I was not alone. The little girl sat on the edge of Whistler's bed, twisting a long strand of blonde hair around one finger.

She sighed dramatically. "I thought you'd *never* wake up."

"Then you were wrong." I smiled. "Some privacy, okay?" She giggled and covered her eyes while I dressed. "All clear," I said, giving her a wink as I opened the bedroom window. The sea breeze was cool and crisp and clean, and I liked the way it felt on my face.

"Are you surprised to see me?" she asked.

"To tell the truth, I thought I might never see you again. I'm glad I was wrong about that."

A smile blossomed on her face. "You're really glad I came?"

"Sure."

"Good. I thought you might be mad...about yesterday, I mean. I got pretty scared. I don't like the bottle house, and when that lady showed up—" Her lower lip trembled. "Well, that lady scared me. The way she talked about ghosts. I hid, but I heard what she said to you. I didn't think she was very nice, and when she said she was taking you to the Whistler Estate...."

"It's okay, sweetheart. Whatever it is, you can tell me about it."

"She scared me, is all. I was worried about you. I thought maybe I could help if something was wrong."

"You're very brave," I said. "But I'm fine. Everything is okay."

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure—"

I bit off the sentence before I could finish it. Suddenly, I wasn't sure about anything at all. Outside, a troubling sound scratched the silence. The squawk of a police radio.

In a second I was at the window. Before another second ticked off, I saw everything I needed to see. Near the porte-cochere that hooded the main entrance to Circe's mansion stood two sheriff's deputies wearing shit-brown uniforms. One of them swore under his breath as he turned down the volume control on his

handpack radio. The other drew a pistol, his gaze roving from window to window.

I was lucky. The deputy didn't spot me. He slapped his partner with a dirty look and together they disappeared under the porte-cochere, heading for the front door.

I had to get out of there. I turned and nearly stepped through the little girl. She looked up at me, startled blue eyes in a face that was a handful of nothing.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," I lied. "Everything's okay. But you have to leave, and you have to do it now."

"But why?"

"Just trust me," I said. I couldn't give her another answer. There wasn't any time.

I wasn't armed. I glanced around the room. The dusty cat o' nine tails hanging on the wall wasn't going to do me much good. My K-bar was in the guest bedroom. I had to get it. Fast.

I started down the hall. The little girl trailed me. She was talking too loud, and I had to remind myself that no one could hear her but me. Still, I needed to concentrate. I had to hear the cops. I had to know what they were doing.

I told her to be quiet. I said it too fast and too hard and too loud. She started to cry. Gooseflesh prickled my skin as her little hand passed through mine, but she couldn't stop me now. Nothing would stop me now. I had to keep moving. I needed that knife.

Two steps and I'd be in the guest room.

Below, I heard the front door swing open.

The sound of the sea and whispers.

And then another sound stopped me cold.

A held breath burned in my lungs. I stood just inside the bedroom doorway. The sound was everywhere.

The little girl didn't hear it. Not yet. I turned. I had to stop her before she entered the room. But there was no stopping her. She was a ghost.

She tumbled through my arms, and through me, and into the room. And what she saw there was a raw vision of hell, and what she heard was the tireless buzzing of a hundred flies.

The walls of the guest room were papered with bloody tattoos. Torn

ridges of blue scale. Hellish smiles eclipsed by crawling carrion insects. The faces of children and demons I might have recognized had they not been wet with bright red gouts of blood that had dripped like clotted jam until they dried to an enamel gleam.

Circe Whistler lay on the bed in a tangle of black satin sheets, her corpse crawling with flies.

Dead. Gutted. Skinned from head to toe.

Red everywhere, except for her cold blue eyes.

My K-bar knife was planted in her heart.

I saw a flash of movement in the far corner of the room. Something was huddled in the shadows. Something shorn of skin, a tattered mess that opened its cold blue eyes and screamed.

It was Circe's ghost. It had to be. She rose from the corner, her eyes twin beacons of pain, and I could smell hate on her like a perfume born of murder and blood and the rot of an early grave.

The ghost didn't come for me. She didn't even look at me. It was as if she knew that I was powerless to stop her. Instead she staggered toward the little girl.

The child was paralyzed with fright. She stared up at that cleaved face, unable to look away from icy blue pools nestled beneath bloody brows. I yelled at the girl, begged her to run, but she couldn't move at all. She couldn't even look at me and I tried to snatch her away from the thing but I couldn't even touch her, there was never a way I could touch her, and soon the mutilated shade closed its ravaged arms around the little girl and they joined in a midnight wail and together they were gone.

Silence filled the room, or it should have.

But it didn't. I was holding my breath, shutting everything out just as I had the night before in Circe's bed.

I couldn't afford to do that now.

There were sounds and I had to hear them. My own ragged breathing. Circling flies cutting buzzsaw melodies. And the deputies were coming. They must have heard me warn the little girl, and now I heard them climbing the twisted wrought iron staircase.

I snatched the K-bar from between the corpse's ribs.

On the landing, booted footfalls muffled by carpet. I heard every step. They were close. Two men trying to be quiet who didn't know how to be quiet at all:

“We should be using those damn Dobermans.”

“Uh-uh. Dogs wouldn’t know us from him.”

“Maybe. But this stinks.”

“So let’s get it done.”

More footsteps. I took a deep breath and held it, the stink of death burning in my lungs.

No one was going to smell that stink on me.

I clutched the knife. The room had two doors: one that opened onto the hallway and another that led to a bathroom with no other exit. There was a window on the other side of the bed, but I wasn’t going through it. A twenty-foot drop to a brick driveway didn’t seem like an option, and I wasn’t going to get shot in the back while I jumped, or while running for the security fence that separated the property from the shadow-choked treeline beyond.

A floorboard creaked in the hallway.

I heard the smooth sound of automatic slides as both men chambered shells.

They had guns, and I had a knife.

And there was only one way out.

I gripped the K-bar and stepped into the hallway.

Both pistols were aimed in my face. The deputies stood shoulder to shoulder. The one on the left yelled, “Drop it!”

His partner didn’t waste that much time. He pulled the trigger. The bullet sang past my ear like a steel fly as I moved in on him, slicing the inside of his right forearm to the bone. He dropped his pistol and before it hit the carpet the K-bar had pierced his Kevlar vest and his rib cage, gouging a trench in his heart.

He dropped the same way his gun had. His partner watched him fall, but that was a mistake. He should have been watching me because I had not stopped moving. My arm came up and the pommel of the knife caught his square jaw and I followed through with my elbow. There was a wicked crack as his jaw splintered and then he was off-balance and I waded in, tumbling him over the railing.

His brown eyes stared up at me in shock as he slammed against the hardwood floor below.

“Sweet Jesus,” he moaned, slurring the words through his shattered jaw. He tried to get up, still muttering like he was down on his knees in church, but his brain tripped a circuit and cut him off soon enough.

My heart thundered in my chest. Adrenaline was burning me down. Flies

buzzed around my head. I stared down at the deputy I'd stabbed. He was dead. Not even bleeding anymore. But he'd spilled more than enough blood. Or I had spilled it for him.

Soon the flies would find him.

I took the dead cop's pistol. I wanted out.

I hurried down the wrought iron staircase, rolled the wounded deputy, and took his gun belt and two spare clips of ammunition. I buckled on the belt. Then I peeled off the cop's shit-brown jacket and put that on too. I didn't think I was going to fool anyone. Not really. But the jacket might buy me a second's worth of hesitation, and that was all I wanted.

In the adjoining room—the dining room where I'd eaten the night before—a window shattered and broken glass sprayed across the floor.

I remembered the configuration of the room. A wall of glass doors that opened onto the pool area.

Someone was coming in the back way.

So I'd go out the front. I jammed the K-bar under the gun belt and grabbed the second pistol. The front door stood open. I elbowed through it, an automatic in each hand.

No one stood in my way. I eyed the treeline to the north. Nothing, but that followed expectations. This was local yokel law enforcement. No SWAT teams. No snipers.

And no prowler car parked under the porte-cochere. The deputies had probably walked down the long driveway from the main gate. I figured there were four or five cars parked up there. Probably the whole fucking force was down on me.

Why...I could certainly guess that after seeing the corpse upstairs.

But who had set me up...that was another story. Right now I didn't have time for it.

The property was surrounded by a security fence. Any way I went, I'd have to climb it. The question was which way to go. A bare rocky wasteland separated the house from the ragged cliffs that dropped to the ocean. To the north was forest, but too much open space separated me from the treeline.

I started moving in the opposite direction, following a rustic porch that ran south along the front of the house.

I didn't see anyone until I turned the corner.

Another deputy. His back was turned, and he was taking little Indian steps, his gun held out before him.

I aimed both pistols at his back.

If he turned around, he'd be dead before he ever saw me.

Someone yelled from the pool area behind the house. The deputy hurried toward the noise without a backward glance.

I lowered my pistols. On the south side of the house, the trees grew close. I squinted into the dark forest. Nothing. It was clear. Had to be. If anyone was waiting in ambush, they would have brought me down by now.

A voice behind me: "Freeze, asshole."

The guns were in my hands, but I knew I couldn't make the turn fast enough.

"Drop the guns," he said. "Do it now."

I did. He told me to get my hands in the air, and I did that too. Then I turned around.

I recognized the deputy. He had a trench in his heart gouged by a K-bar knife, and the front of his uniform was stained with blood, and I could see through him like a window.

I knelt and picked up the pistols.

The deputy's ghost tried to shoot me. If there was something in his hand, I couldn't see it. But his trigger finger kept moving, though nothing happened at all.

He stared at me, shaking now, aiming a weapon that only he could see. "You'd better not move," he said. "Y-you'd better not even twitch."

My words came out in a cold whisper. "There's something I'll tell you. You probably won't understand. Maybe you can't. But you'd better get used to it, all the same."

He squinted at me, his brows twisted in confusion.

"You're finished," I said. "Back there, in the house. I stabbed you in the heart. Remember? I killed you. You're dead."

He looked through his hands. "It's not true." He stared at the bloody hole in his transparent chest. "It can't be true."

"It's true," I said.

He stood there staring like he couldn't understand at all. I left him to it. I vaulted over the porch railing into bright daylight, landing in a bed of yellow and orange marigolds.

Fat blossoms snapped on weak necks as I kicked through the flowers.

They didn't stand a chance.

The dead cop was crying now.

No one heard him but me. But I didn't pay attention. I'd murdered him and there was nothing else I could do. The woods were so very close.

Giant redwoods. Alive, and dark. I could smell them, and the smell was good, and clean, and secret.

In another moment I was out of the sun and into the shadows.

And then I was gone.

6

It was midnight by the time I made it back to the bridge where I'd met the little girl's ghost.

I had no business going there. I should have gone straight to the banged up truck I'd bought in Baja. By now I should have been halfway to San Francisco, figuring a way to get myself a ticket on the first flight to parts unknown.

I knew that the same way I knew I'd been set up at Circe Whistler's mansion. But I just couldn't leave. Not until I knew what had happened to the little girl. She was seared in my memory. There was no escaping the look of horror I'd seen in her eyes when Circe Whistler's shade grabbed her. At that moment, fear had stilled the little girl's tongue. But she didn't have to speak. Her eyes said everything for her.

"Save me, Clay," they said. "Please, please save me."

I couldn't forget that. I couldn't forget those pleading blue eyes staring at me as the little girl vanished in a whirlwind of blood and shadow, kicking and screaming against a flayed embrace.

I'd never seen anything like that in my life.

Oh, I'd seen plenty of ghosts. Since I was a little boy, I'd seen them. Probably from the day I was born, when the doctor tore the caul from my face. I'd studied the spirits of the dead. Most of them were sleepwalkers, completely unaware of the living. Some were trapped so deep in pits of pain that the only thing they could do was suffer. And others were like the deputy I'd murdered at Circe's mansion—aware of their surroundings, alert to the presence of the living, but unwilling to accept the simple fact that they were dead.

The way I saw it, the dead weren't much different from the living. They

could hate just as deeply. I knew that, just as I knew that hate was what had driven Circe's shade when she attacked the little girl. I'd smelled it in the air—that miasma born of murder and blood and the rot of an early grave—and both my gut and my heart recognized it for what it was.

But why would Circe Whistler hate a little girl? And why was the child powerless in Circe's presence? Why didn't she try to escape?

Why did she turn to me?

Why did she plead for help with those innocent blue eyes?

I didn't know the answer to those questions any more than I knew how to help her. Me, a guy who killed for a living, a guy who made ghosts with the sharpened blade of a K-bar knife. The living feared me, but I was powerless against the dead. I hadn't done a thing while a skinned specter kidnapped a dead little girl.

She'd said we were like Hansel and Gretel. Lost and alone, just the two of us. But now she was gone and she hadn't left anything behind, not even a trail of bread crumbs.

I didn't know how to find her. I didn't know how to save her. But I hoped there was someone, or something, that could do what I couldn't. And I hoped that the girl would return to this spot, the place where she spent her days, and show me that there was a reason to have faith in something intangible, something I couldn't see or hear. Something I had to feel.

I waited on the bridge for a long time. It was dark. A full moon hung somewhere overhead, but it could no more penetrate the redwood shroud that covered the bridge than could the sunshine of the previous day.

The darkness didn't matter. If the little girl was here, she'd find me, no matter how dark it was. The night gathered close. I tried to be patient, as patient as the girl had been all the years she'd spent on this bridge.

But I wasn't a patient man. I started thinking about other things. Circe Whistler, in particular. The way she'd looked coming out of that swimming pool, the way her muscles moved under her tattooed flesh, the way her skin brought the ink alive.

And then I remembered the wall of the guest room, papered with bloody tattoos. So much blood, but more hate. It was a rage killing. I'd seen a few. I knew what one looked like.

Soon enough the rest of it clamped down on me like a guard dog's bite.

I wondered who had set me up.

Janice Ravenwood? Spider Ripley?

Those were the obvious suspects, but I imagined that there was one other I could add to the list.

A fellow named Diabolos Whistler.

I nearly laughed out loud. The idea reflected my desperation, and I discarded it. I wasn't ready to start jumping at shadows. Not just yet.

My thoughts, as they always did, turned to more conventional matters. Matters I could understand. I started thinking about all the money I was due. Money for cutting off an old man's head. Money I would never collect with Circe Whistler dead.

But I didn't like thinking that way. Not here. Not in this place under the redwoods where a creek whispered as it rushed to the sea.

I'll admit that my feelings surprised me. I thought about the little girl instead, remembering the things she'd said. The things she'd done, too.

She took me to the bottle house, even though the place scared her. And she followed me to Circe's mansion, too. She came because she was worried about me.

She wanted to protect me.

The little girl was willing to do that.

Just because I talked to her.

Just because I sat by her side, watching a steelhead swim upstream.

Just because I tried to hold her hand.

I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. Another kind of man would have said a prayer, but I wasn't another kind of man. I was the same man I'd always been. A man who killed for money. A man who saw ghosts.

With my own eyes, I had watched men and women die. I saw what death held for them. I stared down while they surrendered their souls in the bright light of day and the black shadows of night. I watched them face that light, and cower in those shadows, and go on the same way they had when they'd drawn breath.

But never once did I see an angel come for one of my victims. Never once did I hear pearly gates swing open to the strains of a heavenly choir. Never once did I scent brimstone on the wind, or watch as a ghost took the cold hand of Charon.

Sometimes I saw nothing at all. Only an empty corpse. Another kind of man might take that as a sign of a greater power beyond mortal comprehension, but I couldn't do that.

It was beyond me. I was a man who couldn't even conjure up a prayer. The thoughts in my head flowed on tides of memory, cold waters filled with

sights and sounds I couldn't escape or forget.

The music of the ocean, and the haunting melody of a spectral wind fluting through a house made of bottles, and the hungry buzzing of a hundred flies. An old man mewling as he died alone in Mexico, and the cries of a deputy who didn't realize that I had stabbed him in the heart. I listened to all of it. And when those sounds were swept away I was left with the midnight wail of a scarlet whirlwind that gathered together the ghosts of a vengeful woman and a terrified girl and took them to a place I'd never been.

I wondered about that place.

There was no way I could imagine it.

It, or any other place I'd never visited.

One thing was certain. If it existed, that place of a thousand dark imaginings, then I was bound for it.

It was only a matter of time before I'd get there.

There was no use in a man like me praying. But there were other things I could do. Things that other men couldn't. Maybe, if I did them right, the little girl would return to this place. Maybe, if I did them right, she'd sit with me again.

Maybe I could try, one more time, to hold her hand.

I wanted that more than anything.

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Dawn was coming on fast.

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PART TWO:

SÉANCE ON A WET AFTERNOON

What may this mean,
That thou, dead corpse, again in complete steel
Revisit'st thus the glimpses of the moon
Making night hideous, and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?

—Shakespeare

Hamlet

Act I, Scene IV

1

Cliffside, California was alive, and I didn't need a medium to tell me that was an unusual occurrence for a tourist town in the middle of the off-season.

But I did need a medium.

A woman of energies named Janice Ravenwood. She was the reason I'd come to Cliffside. I parked the Toyota at a coastal access lot hidden from the main drag, an eight-block strip of tourist traps called Gull Lane. There wasn't any parking to be had in town anyway. Cliffside's two motels were quickly filling with assorted rubberneckers, freaks, and reporters in the wake of the grisly events at Circe Whistler's estate.

Today I planned to keep a lower profile. Completely subterranean was the way I planned to play it. I couldn't afford to attract the wrong kind of attention, i.e. the attention of pissed off individuals who wore badges and carried guns.

I jammed the dead cop's pistol under my belt and slipped on a flannel shirt. I left the tail untucked to cover the gun. The K-bar went under my belt on the other side. The other pistol stayed under the seat, but I didn't lock the truck. If I had to make a quick exit, I didn't want to be fumbling for my keys while some cop shot me in the back.

The day was overcast. Clouds pumped in from the west, heavy clouds the color of the K-bar blade. A little rain wouldn't bother me, though. Bad weather would make it tougher on anyone trying to track me down. It's harder to do anything in the rain.

Walking into town, I only saw one deputy—a young kid. He was talking to a vanload of CNN guys who had parked in a red zone. They were spoon-feeding him a load of shit about freedom of the press and the people's right to know, and the poor kid was actually going along with it like he figured he'd better be polite or they'd point a camera in his face and make him look like Barney Fife on the evening news.

The deputy didn't give me a second look as I passed him by. That didn't surprise me. But the CNN guys didn't check me out either, and that was a surprise.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Passing muster with CNN's hounds meant one thing—the odds were good that there wasn't a description of a suspect in Circe Whistler's murder.

Not yet, anyway. But life could be fluid, like Janice Whistler said. Circumstances could change awfully quickly. Whether they would or not depended on the real identity of Circe Whistler's killer. I knew that the killer had tipped off the cops once already. Their appearance at the scene of the crime proved that.

I amused myself by imagining Diabolos Whistler's head calling 911 and doing the deed. Not fucking likely. Janice Ravenwood and Spider Ripley were another story. If either or both of them wanted to frame me for murder, their silence after the fact would be a surprise.

Not that I couldn't explain it. If Spider was indeed in San Francisco with Diabolos Whistler's head, I doubted he'd had an opportunity to talk to the local cops. Then again, I had no real guarantee that Ripley had gone anywhere. The same with the medium—I didn't have any idea where she might be or who she might be talking to.

There might be other suspects, of course. People I didn't know. Circe had mentioned a sister, Lethe. But if I remembered Circe's story correctly, her sister lived the life of a San Francisco club rat. Sure, that was all I knew about Lethe Whistler. Apart from that, the information was secondhand and from an obviously biased source. But if Circe's description of her sister was accurate, Lethe wouldn't be my first choice for the brains behind a murder/frame-up scheme.

There was no sense chasing my tail. After all, Circe was a high-ranking priestess in a satanic cult. Who knew what kind of maggots were crawling around under the floorboards of her church.

Still, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wasn't the only one. The first newspaper rack I passed flashed a bold headline: **SLAUGHTER AT WHISTLER ESTATE.** I glanced through the glass at the first four paragraphs of the article, reading down to the fold.

Those paragraphs convinced me of one thing—the writer of the article owned a thesaurus. That was the only way to explain the six variants of “bloody” in the lurid come-on. I figured the meat of the piece had to be on the bottom half of the page, so I dropped a couple of quarters into the machine and bought a paper.

I leaned against a lamppost and read the rest of it. Minus the hyperbole,

the story went like this: at present, Circe Whistler was “an unidentified female” and there were “no known suspects.” Police were following “a number of leads” ...yadda, yadda, yadda...I’d just blown fifty cents.

I’d have to look elsewhere if I wanted more information. The sound of simmering rumor drifted from the open door of a crowded diner, but I already had my eye on a guy with a pay phone growing out of his ear.

He wore earth tones, the kinds of colors that show up best on television. Nothing else about him was particularly photogenic. His skin was fishbelly white, and a cigarette dangled from his lips, and his expression seemed terminally pinched—as if he’d got his nose stuck in a book about ten years ago and had only just managed to extract it.

In other words, the guy practically reeked “media leech.” A couple more sentences out of his mouth and I figured out that he was a writer, one of those guys who hacks out those true crime paperbacks you find at the grocery store just down the aisle from the Kellogg’s Cornflakes.

I eavesdropped while the reporter lied outrageously to his editor, saying that it was raining buckets and he couldn’t get a room at the local Holiday Inn. Then he started bitching about the town’s other motel. “For God’s sake, Simon,” he whined, “it’s a roach’s nest called the Cliffside Motor Court. It’s not even in the AAA book. The place actually advertises *waterbeds*...and you know how bad my back is!”

He huffed and puffed while Simon gave him some obviously bad news. Then he played his trump card.

“Simon, you’re my editor, and I like to think that you’re also my friend. But if I don’t have my rest, I can’t possibly do Larry King tonight.”

I could almost hear good old Simon hyperventilating on the other end of the line. As for the writer, he knew he had the upper hand at last and moved in for the kill. “What happened, Simon, is that I ran into a CNN crew at breakfast. I told their producer that I was doing a book on the Whistler murders for you, and that I’d already created a profile of Whistler’s killer. She called King’s producer, and we’re booked for a remote on tonight’s broadcast.”

He sighed while the editor wedged in a few words. “Of *course* I lied about the profile. This is CNN, Simon! Imagine the advance orders we’ll get! Only this time I want a hardcover. No more paperbacks. I want a jacket photo that I don’t have to pay for and cover approval and a book tour. Get my agent on the phone and hammer out a deal before airtime, and—”

He broke off laughing. “No no no. The profile won’t be a problem at all.

These idiots are all the same. This one is a classic publicity hound. He takes too many wild chances. He's the kind who *wants* to be caught so he can bask in the media spotlight.

"Anyway, once they get him, I'll have a book for you in a month. Maybe less. You'll pay for it, sure. You'll pay for my trip to the maniac's home town, and you'll pay for my lunch with his third-grade teacher, and you'll pay for the photos I swipe from his first girlfriend's photo album...just like you'll pay for a fucking chiropractor if I have to sleep on a waterbed in this miserable little shitsplat of a town—"

I'd heard more than enough.

I invaded the writer's space and glared at him.

He glared back.

I tapped the disconnect and hung him up. As wild chances go, it wasn't much of one, but it was the best I could do to match my profile on such short notice.

And it did the trick. The guy looked like he was ready to go postal. "Find your own phone, dickhead!" he said. "This one's going to be tied up for quite a while."

"I don't think so." I smiled. "In fact, I think you'd better get moving, and you'd better do it right now."

"What are you talking about?"

"I just left the Cliffside Motor Court. They only had two rooms left. I got the one without the waterbed."

The guy slammed the handset into the cradle, nearly severing a couple of my fingers. He tried to rush past me but I played it slow as molasses, like I couldn't figure out which way he was going. I stepped in his way and let him eat my shoulder. Then he moved the other way and so did I, stepping on his right foot, and not at all softly.

I apologized, of course. The writer swore magnificently and hurried off.

I watched him go. He was limping a little bit. He brushed one hand through his hair and swore some more, oblivious to the fact that he'd lost something he was going to miss.

His wallet.

I flipped it open and checked it out.

His name was Clifford Rakes. Clifford's wallet contained a Florida Driver's License, Visa and Mastercard and American Express, membership cards for seven different writers' organizations, business cards for three chiropractors

and two psychiatrists, a few mysterious 900 numbers scrawled on the back of a napkin, and a plastic insert that held several photos—Clifford Rakes’s own private stroke gallery.

I’d never run across a man with Clifford’s particular kink before—all the photos in his wallet were clipped from the dust jackets of hardcover books.

They were photos of bestselling women authors, each one backed with a series of carefully clipped blurbs that touted their accomplishments.

Jacqueline Susann. Danielle Steel. Jackie Collins.

Even, God help me, Barbara Cartland.

I closed Clifford’s wallet and slipped it into my pocket.

I didn’t like having those women there.

Not at all.

* * *

I tried to forget about Clifford Rakes’s harem and concentrate on the matter at hand. Right now, that meant taking a look at the Cliffside, California phonebook.

There was no listing for a Janice Ravenwood. There was a Ripley, but the first name wasn’t Spider. It was Gilbert.

Gilbert Ripley lived on Surf Glenn Lane, wherever that was. I played around with it. Circe’s bugman bodyguard sure didn’t look like a Gilbert. But I tore out the page just in case, folded it, and tucked it in my shirt pocket. Then I flipped to the yellow pages and checked out the listing for local bookstores.

Cliffside only had one.

The address was on Gull Lane, less than a block away. The place was called Goddess Books. I figured I’d just gotten lucky, twice.

* * *

I was right. I only had to walk about twenty feet to find the store, and the display window featured Janice Ravenwood’s books.

Chimes tinkled. The door opened and disgorged a gaggle of twentysomethings dressed in black. Neon hair and piercings and pupils that gleamed like dark little pills. Smiling, they passed me by without a second glance.

One of the young men laughed. “Man, it’s gonna be some freak show.”

“Yeah,” a woman with studded lips agreed. “The circus is definitely comin’ to town.”

“We’re gonna have front row seats,” the man said. “I can’t wait for the fuckin’ *funeral*.”

“Caskets for two and devil worshippers. You just don’t get entertainment like that anymore.”

The sick thing was that they were right. The circus was coming to town. The tribes were gathering. These kids were one harmless faction, but there were others far more dangerous.

Circe Whistler’s true believers, for instance. I wondered what they would be like, the one’s who had taken Diabolos Whistler’s teachings to heart. One thing was clear—if they knew what I’d done to the man they worshipped as Satan’s chosen one, they wouldn’t pass me by with a smile and a laugh.

Armed with another reason to make my visit brief, I entered the bookstore. The clerk rewarded my bravery with a smile. In boots, a long skirt and flowing scarves, she looked like the lone survivor of seventies’ hippie chic. Either that, or she’d stolen Stevie Nicks’s clothes.

“Are you a reporter?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m looking for ghosts.”

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow, pleased with the news. Not that I was looking for ghosts, but that I wasn’t a reporter.

It was simple, really. A reporter would want information. He wouldn’t buy anything. I might.

“It’s kind of hard for me to talk about,” I explained. “Especially to a stranger. You see, I was born with a caul—”

“A definite sign of spiritual sensitivity,” she interrupted.

“And lately I’ve had the strangest feelings, as if there are others around me when I know I’m all alone. Sometimes it’s as if I actually see someone....” I laughed. “I’m sorry. You probably think I’m crazy.”

“Not at all!”

“Well, it’s just that telling someone that you see ghosts....”

“Around here, it’s the people who don’t see them that I worry about. Cliffside is known in the occult community as a place of dark energies.” She glanced through the window at a passing news van. “It seems that those energies may have gotten a little out of hand last night.”

“It seems.”

“It’s nothing new, really.” She bustled from behind the counter and

directed me to a low bookshelf. “Cliffside was born in violence. That’s our history, the root of the energy pattern that determines our collective destiny.”

“How old is the town?”

“Well, we’re dealing with written history, which is sometimes hard to trace. What I can tell you is that the Russians first came to this region in the early 1800s. They built Fort Ross in 1812, and another settlement was established near the present sight of Cliffside in 1815. In 1818, several Russian women accused of practicing witchcraft in the Cliffside settlement were tried and convicted by Russian authorities.”

“Like the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts?”

“What happened here was similar. Six women were executed at Hangman’s Point, just north of town. To this day the hanging tree still stands. Some people claim that the spiritual resonance from the event still permeates everything that happens in Cliffside. I’m open to that kind of logic. I can’t help thinking that last night—”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Well,” she laughed, “it’s only a theory.” She handed me a couple books on the Hangman’s Point witches. “If you like, you can visit the Point. I can give you directions. On nights when the energies are right, people with gifts such as yours have actually seen the shades of the Russian witches.”

The clerk led me to a table at the front of the store, where several Janice Ravenwood books were on display. “These should help you,” she said. “And they’re all autographed. Janice lives in Cliffside.”

I thanked the clerk and looked at the books. Janice had started at the bottom of the book world: *Living with the Dead* and *The Ghost Inside You* were both self-published under her own imprint. She turned the second book into a bestseller on the talk show circuit. At least that was the story according to the cover copy for her third, *Marble Roads: Journeys From the Grave*. New York had snatched that one up. It was all about Janice and her spirit guide, a “noble blonde beauty who died at the dawn of the nineteenth century.” The noble beauty in question was one Natasha Orlovsky, who not too surprisingly was one of the Hangman’s Point witches.

I flipped to the back flap of *Marble Roads* and studied the hazy photo of Janice Ravenwood. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was fanned over a black evening dress and she was doing her best to look beautiful in a noble, Russian kind of way.

Which was another way of saying that the photo did exactly what it was

supposed to do and then some. The way I figured it, with a jacket photo like that and a couple rungs' ascendancy on the bestseller lists, Janice was sure to earn herself a spot in Clifford Rakes's wallet gallery.

But I was getting ahead of myself, concentrating on the sizzle and forgetting the steak. I took the time to sample the words Janice Ravenwood had written. It was the usual stuff for the usual crowd, pillow books for the unimaginative and the gullible, but it wasn't all bad. Janice could actually write. She had it all over Shirley MacLaine, and she kept the touchy-feely bits to a minimum. For example, she handled each and every one of those philosophical intangibles that troubled me in a straightforward glossary that closed out *Marble Roads*.

I was tempted to clip it and save it for easy reference.

Maybe keep it in my wallet.

Or the wallet I'd recently stolen.

Keep it right there with those photos of bestselling literary lionesses.

But clipping could wait. I grabbed paperbacks of *Living with the Dead* and *The Ghost Inside You*, adding a *Marble Roads* hardcover to my stack. Then I reached under my untucked shirttail, my hand barely skimming the pommel of my K-bar as I extracted Clifford Rakes's wallet.

Good old Clifford.

"I think these should get me started," I said, sliding the books toward the cash register.

The clerk's expression told me that I'd obviously made the right impression. "In two weeks, Janice will be doing a signing for *To the Devil a Daughter*," she gushed. "It's Circe Whistler's autobiography. Janice was the ghostwriter."

"They couldn't have timed that one better if they'd tried, huh?"

"Well, it's not out just yet," the clerk explained, managing to look slightly embarrassed. "We're not scheduled to have copies until next week, but I'd be glad to reserve one for you if you're interested."

"Do you think there's any chance I could get in touch with Ms. Ravenwood before then? She seems like such an expert. I'd love to talk to her about the things I've seen."

"Since *Marble Roads*, Janice has become very popular. And with the Circe Whistler book coming, well...I'm sure you understand that Janice is a very busy person. She doesn't often do private consultations —"

"Sure." I handed over Clifford's American Express Card. But since I'm

here in town...well, I really feel that I have to at least give it a try. I'm having such a hard time with the things I'm seeing, and I really want to understand what's going on."

The clerk's brows knitted in real concern.

Mine did too, but in anticipation.

She opened the cash drawer, slipped a card from one of the trays, and handed it to me.

There was a phone number, but no address.

It didn't matter. This kind of detective work, I could handle.

I signed for the books and the clerk bagged them for me. Then I returned to the pay phone. This time I made a call.

Janice picked up on the second ring. I mentioned her work on the Circe Whistler autobiography. I said that I was with CNN, specifically *The Larry King Show*.

I didn't say much else.

I didn't have to.

Janice took my introduction as an overture. She asked if I'd like to come over for lunch. A few seconds later, I had her address. I should have known it all along.

"It's the house at the end of Hangman's Point Drive," she said. "My place overlooks the hanging tree. You can't miss it."

2

At the end of Hangman's Point Drive, a tree with gnarled branches scratched the iron sky.

Not one leaf on that tree, and nothing grew beneath its bare branches. I stepped over slabs of bark that lay on the ground like scales shed by a dying dragon. Lover's graffiti scarred the trunk, and fat black beetles scuttled in a pile of broken branches near a historical marker that looked more like a headstone.

Anyone else might have thought the hanging tree was dead. Ready for the chainsaw. But I knew that it was alive.

I could see that clearly.

The tree bore fruit. A fine crop of ghosts. Six Russian witches dangled from nooses that had rotted long ago, but the ropes didn't seem rotten to me. To my eyes they were as fine and strong as the day they were knotted, like healthy stems bearing the weight of ripe apples.

The ropes twisted and creaked against the rising wind. The storm was coming on fast. I leaned against the trunk and stared up at the iron sky through a tangle of crippled branches. The smaller branches swayed against the surging storm, scratching the sky more eagerly now. Before long, I knew they'd slice heaven's belly and rain would fall like cold droplets of blood.

I waited for that moment, and so did the witches.

Spaced evenly on low branches like decorations on a maypole, hands bound behind their backs with festive satin hair ribbons, the ghosts danced on the wind. A plump redhead here, a thin brunette there. A tall girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen, her naked feet forever kicking just an inch above the ground. An older woman with long black hair that lashed her face like a scourge, and another who had shed one of her shoes and seemed to be searching for it with eternally downcast eyes.

But it was the sixth witch that held my attention. She was blonde, with features that might be described as noble. I threaded my way through the others until I stood near her, close enough to study her bright blue eyes.

She was Natasha Orlovsky, Janice Ravenwood's spirit guide. She had to be. She was the only blonde in the bunch.

She looked down at me, and she didn't blink. Her expression softened as our eyes met, so suddenly that it surprised me. Despite the claims of the woman at the new age bookstore, I had no way of knowing how long it had been since someone with a heartbeat had looked into Natasha's eyes.

I was willing to bet that it had been a very long time, indeed. I wanted to talk to her, but I couldn't see how that was possible. For one thing, I couldn't speak Russian. But it wouldn't have mattered if I could. Natasha Orlovsky's spirit couldn't speak to anyone, in any language. Like her sister witches, her lips were stitched closed.

In death, she was mute. There was no way that she could answer my questions, even if I could find a way to ask them.

There was no way she could tell me anything.

Me, or Janice Ravenwood, or anyone else.

"I'm sorry, Natasha," I said, even though I knew she couldn't understand me.

She moaned, or maybe it was only the branch that bore her spirit's weight. Resignation colored her eyes. And then the rising wind caught her, and the rope twisted, and the storm turned her eyes away.

A raindrop splashed my hand.

The first of many.

It felt like a tear.

* * *

The house was small and old. Nothing more than a vacation bungalow, really, though Janice had tried to spruce it up. Flowerpots dotted the porch, and the knocker on the front door was a brightly polished brass sun that smiled cheerfully.

I entered the house and found Janice Ravenwood in the kitchen, making precious little hors d'oeuvres for a reporter from CNN.

"You're a fraud," I said.

I must have surprised her. She gasped and gave a little start, but even in the cold silence of my accusation her eyes refused to surrender their secrets.

But they would not hold those secrets for long. Not if I could do anything about it. "I guess Natasha didn't warn you about me," I said. "Then again, it's pretty hard to say anything when your lips are stitched together like a torn mainsail."

“What...what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you. And Natasha Orlovsky—your spirit guide and co-author. She’s hanging in that tree out there. Her spirit is, anyway. If you really communicated with her, you’d know that. The same way you’d know that the men who strung her up stitched her lips together.”

A little silver shiver filled the ensuing silence. Janice was shaking; her bracelets made nervous music in the small kitchen. I listened to the sound, and I let her think about what I’d said. I smelled the fresh mushrooms and red peppers that she’d just finished slicing, the fragrant basil that waited in a wooden bowl. She held a small knife in her hand. It made music, too. The blade stuttered against the rolling butcher’s block that separated us.

Janice Ravenwood wasn’t one to give up easily. “There’s a reporter coming for lunch,” she said. “He should be here any minute.”

“A guy from CNN?”

The blade stopped stuttering and Janice started. “H-how do you know that?”

“I should have told you—I’m psychic.”

She stiffened. “Don’t play with me, Saunders.”

“Okay. Maybe it’s simpler than that. Maybe I got your phone number from the local new age bookstore. Maybe I phoned you myself. And maybe I pretended to be a reporter, and you invited me to lunch.”

“All right. You’ve shown me how smart you are. Now tell me why you’re here.”

“Maybe I came here to find out about you. Maybe I wanted to see what you could do for me. Maybe I wanted to see what Natasha could tell me about a ghost without any skin. Maybe I’d like to know where a ghost like that might hide.

“And maybe I saw another ghost when I got here. Maybe I saw six of them.” I glanced through the kitchen window at the dead witches swinging in the rising storm, and I described each ghost to Janice Ravenwood.

She listened without a word. I wondered what was going on in her head. One thing was sure—she wasn’t letting go of that knife. She stared down at it while I talked. By the time I finished, I could tell she’d regained her composure.

When she looked up, her gaze was appraising. She had questions of her own. The first one began, “Your gift—”

“Don’t call it that.” I wasn’t going to let her take control. “What I’ve got isn’t any kind of gift. It’s a curse. I was born with a caul. I see the dead...or

haven't you guessed that by now?"

"I've met people like you before. I've even worked with a few...."

She wouldn't stop staring at me. She was getting too brave.

I pulled the K-bar.

She saw the blood on it.

That shut her up.

"Don't waste my time," I said. "I know your game. I'm all done playing it. You can't give me the answers I came for. But you can give me some answers I need."

She put down her knife and took a step backward, her hands raised conciliatorily. "I know you don't believe me. I know you think I'm a fraud. But I can help you if you let me. I do have powers. Maybe not the powers I've claimed, but if you'll give me a chance I'm sure I can tell you anything you want to know."

Her eyes locked with mine. There was a door behind her. It stood open. Less than five feet separated us, but she was on the other side of that rolling butcher's block.

I shoved it out of the way and it crashed into the sink, spilling sliced mushrooms and red peppers and basil. Janice turned to run but I caught a handful of her long blonde hair and stopped her cold.

One pull and she was on the floor at my feet. Before she could take a breath, the K-bar blade was against her throat.

Words crossed my tongue like ice. "If you're not a fraud, then you can call up Circe Whistler's ghost."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want to talk to Circe's ghost. I *need* to talk to her. If you're not a fraud, you conjure her up, and you do it now."

"I ... I can't do that. What you want is impossib—"

"Then you're a liar." The blade nicked her skin. "And I've got no use for a liar."

"Wait! You've got to believe me! I swear that I can help you if you just give me a chance!"

I'd heard the desperate sound of begging before...and the sound of empty promises. Still, I hesitated. Maybe because this was about the little girl. Maybe I just wanted to give her every chance I could, no matter how slim.

Janice's fingers brushed my left hand, the hand that held the knife. But she didn't try to push the blade away.

Instead, she reached for it.

Gripped it. The blade sliced her skin silently—just a shallow cut—but deep enough so that I heard the gentle patter of blood on the scarred linoleum floor.

Janice stared at me.

Her eyes held more secrets than they had a moment before.

“The first one was a long time ago, in Reno,” she began. “You still felt bad about it in those days. His name was Eddie Budz, and he was a blackjack dealer with a bad habit of pocketing chips. You stabbed him six times and he painted you red before he fell. After that, you learned to take them from behind. You killed in Baltimore and Austin and Denver. You spilled blood on Florida sand, and on the snow-blanketed Canadian prairie, and on the sharp black lava of Hawaii.”

Janice kept on talking. I thought she’d never stop.

She was telling the truth, of course.

“The last one was in Los Cabos.” She eyed me hard now, making me pay for my disdain. “But of course, I already know all about him. My gifts aren’t necessary to relate that little tale. Diabolos Whistler was alone, except for those mummies stacked in his library. You came up from behind and stabbed him just above the first vertebra. He gasped a little bit. Then he started mewling—”

“That’s enough.” I pulled her fingers off the blade. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

“Ask me anything,” she said. “If this knife was involved, I can give you an answer.”

“Yesterday I found my knife in Circe Whistler’s chest. Someone stabbed her and skinned her alive. I didn’t do it. I need you to tell me who did.”

“I can tell you many things, but I can’t tell you who killed Circe Whistler.”

“You can,” I said. “And you will.”

I raised the K-bar.

A familiar voice behind me: “Drop the knife, Mr. Saunders. For once, Janice is telling the truth.”

The voice raised gooseflesh on my neck, but I didn’t drop the knife. I pivoted fast, catching Janice in a headlock with the blade pressed to her throat.

“Janice can’t tell you about my murder,” Circe said. “You see, I’m not dead.”

Unfortunately, she was right. Diabolos Whistler’s daughter stepped

toward me, and she wasn't a ghost by any stretch of the imagination. Circe was very much alive. Her strong arms were outstretched, and she followed a Colt Python that filled her black-nailed hands.

"You're full of surprises," I said.

"So are you."

"What are you doing here?"

"You think I'm going to miss an interview with CNN? Satan himself wouldn't miss that."

I had to laugh. That was why Janice had revealed the true nature of her powers. It was a stall. She wasn't trying to help me. She was waiting for Circe to bail her out.

"You really had me fooled," I said. "I really thought that you were dead. Who was the corpse, anyway? One of your doubles?"

"Oh, I don't think I'll do any more of your homework for you, Mr. Saunders."

"Fair's fair," I said. "But I really could use the help. I get the feeling that I'm a little out of my league with you."

"Don't sell yourself short—you surprised me, too. And you caused me a lot of trouble. You weren't supposed to run."

"Sorry I wasn't more cooperative." I angled toward the open door. "Maybe you should have filled me in on your plan. Then I would have known just what to do."

"All you had to do was die." Circe smiled. "And it's not too late for that."

Circe's gun was five feet from my face.

I figured she knew what to do with it.

I pulled Janice's head closer to mine as I stepped through the open doorway.

"Circe," Janice begged. "Listen to him. Give him a chance to tell you what he wants—"

I tugged her hair and we went back another step. The adjoining room was small and dark, its lone window draped with spiderwebs and a half-dozen fat black arachnids. Crammed with boxes and bookshelves, this was obviously a storage area. I hadn't spotted a door yet, but I hoped I'd see one soon. I didn't like the idea of going out through the window with all those damn spiders—

Circe cocked her pistol.

"No!" Janice said. "Oh, Circe...please don't shoot!"

"Shut up," Circe said.

Janice squirmed. I yanked her hair.

“Move again and I’ll cut your head off,” I warned.

Janice whimpered.

“She’s having a really bad day,” Circe said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It doesn’t seem fair. We should settle this. Just the two of us.”

“That suits me.” Circe lowered the gun. “It could be I’m wrong. Maybe we can work it out. Like you say: just the two of us.”

As soon as she stopped talking, I knew that wasn’t what she wanted at all. Something stirred behind me. Instantly, I knew Circe had taken a page from Janice’s book. She was stalling me, too.

She didn’t want to talk. She wanted me dead.

Some things never change.

I pushed Janice into the kitchen and whirled just in time to see Spider Ripley raising a pistol in the darkened storeroom. He was wedged in behind a stack of boxes but that didn’t stop me.

The K-bar gleamed as I went for him. Ripley elbowed a couple boxes in my direction and managed to dodge as the blade came down for the wrist of his gun hand. I was in close and his gun was aimed at the floor. There was no way he could get a shot off, but that didn’t mean he was helpless. Ripley slammed an elbow into my head and knocked me off balance. Then he followed through with his knee, catching me hard in the belly, and I dropped my knife as I stumbled backward.

I slammed into a bookcase. Books rained down on me as the case rocked back and hit the far wall. Then it fell forward, just as Spider got a shot off. The bullet tore through a paperback and into the wall as I leapt at Ripley, and the bookcase continued forward and caught the door that led to the kitchen. The door slammed closed and we were in the dark then and I hit Spider hard, both of us plowing into the near wall as the bookcase crashed to the floor and blocked the doorway.

Circe was on the other side, rattling the knob, shoving at a door she couldn’t open. I dug my fists into Ripley’s scarred belly and he grunted and dropped the gun and it was lost in a pit of shadow that was much too far from the webbed window.

No light crawled there. But a Spider did.

He did more than crawl. He came for me, and he came hard. I ducked two sweeping hooks, then caught another elbow. The room went black as the

first midnight flash of a strobe light. A lost second and I was back with him and the fist he sank into my ribs was like a chisel on ice. He pounded with it, again and again, chipping away until I went down hard, flat on my back.

Cold cold pain froze my ribs but my anger burned it off when I felt the K-bar pinned beneath me on the floor.

I snatched it up and went for Spider Ripley again.

Pain knifed my ribs and brought me up short.

I only managed to slash Ripley's chest.

He fell back against the wall, caught in the spider web of sickly light from the lone window, and that was when I saw it.

Not his torn shirt, or the blood pulsing from a fresh slash beneath it, or the branded ankh on his chest.

No. The thing I saw eclipsed Ripley's ankh.

It hung on a crude rawhide necklace that snared the big man's neck.

It was a silver crucifix.

In dead light born of a brewing storm, Spider Ripley's blood pulsed over polished metal.

I stared at him, and he stared at me.

Hate and embarrassment burned in his eyes. Then the doorknob rattled again.

It was Circe. She'd had enough. Just as Spider was about to launch another attack, a shot went off and a hole appeared near the doorknob. Ripley jumped back and Janice Ravenwood screamed from the kitchen, but that didn't stop Circe. She fired another shot, and the bullet tore through the door and broke the window, sending a half-dozen spiders scurrying in their webs.

I still didn't know how Ripley had entered the storeroom. I hadn't found another door, and I didn't have time to look for one. In the kitchen, Circe yelled at Janice, telling her to get out of the way or else she was going to end up dead, and then another bullet pierced the door and Spider ducked low.

"Ripley!" Circe screamed. "If you're not dead, open the fucking door!"

Spider didn't answer. He didn't even raise his head.

And I didn't waste any time. I jumped through the window. My ribs screamed as I dove into a puddle of rainwater that was much too shallow, but I came up fast and started running.

Bullets splintered wood and hissed past me into the forest. I didn't look back at all.

3

I had a lot of questions.
I needed some answers.
I didn't know how quickly I could get them.
But I knew where to start looking.

* * *

I spotted the mailbox right off. The huge rubber tarantula spiked to the top was a dead giveaway. Given life by a steady stream of pelting raindrops, the tarantula's rubber legs danced over dull gray metal as if the impaled bug were trying to scramble free and escape into the primeval forest beyond.

Spider Ripley's place was set back from Surf Glenn Lane. A gravel road snaked into a stand of dying trees, but I didn't turn off. I stuck to the main road, slowing the Toyota to a crawl, studying the house through a net of twisted branches bristling with rusty red needles as I passed by.

Spider Ripley certainly wasn't an average man. There was nothing average about his house, either. Ripley lived in a pyramid. Oh, not the kind built by ancient Egyptians, whose gods he had worshipped in his younger days. Spider's pyramid looked like it had been designed by a misguided granola-eating architect with a revolutionary selling point—*your home now, your crypt later*. That was the only explanation I could come up with, unless the guy had simply tired of building geodesic domes. Either way, whoever was responsible for the monstrosity that loomed before me definitely had more money than sense, which left him ahead of Spider Ripley in at least one department.

Like the House of Usher, the pyramid had definitely seen better days. I was willing to bet that it dated to the seventies, the golden age of neo-hippie architecture. Three stories high, it was covered with redwood shingles. Of the two walls I could see, one was going green with moss and the other looked like a sick tree that was ready to shed its bark. The few windows shone as black as Ray-Ban lenses, narrow horizontal slits that could easily accommodate the barrel of a sniper's rifle.

No cars were parked out front. What was behind the pyramid, I didn't know. A miniature sphinx wouldn't have surprised me. But as long as there wasn't a car parked back there, I'd be happy.

I followed the main road, and the pyramid disappeared behind me as the forest thickened. Under other circumstances Ripley's place might have made me laugh. As it was, my appreciation of the ironic was running at a low ebb.

My thoughts returned to my fight with Ripley. Not just because my ribs ached. Actually, I didn't remember much about the fight at all. What I remembered was the way Spider's eyes shone with hatred and embarrassment when I saw the silver crucifix hanging around his neck.

It was a strange reaction. Funny. Pathetic. Revealing.

At least I hoped it was revealing. Just as I hoped Spider's crucifix meant what I thought it did.

Otherwise, my coming here was a waste of time.

The windshield wipers beat a steady rhythm. Surf Glenn Lane curved toward the coastline. A quarter mile from Spider's place, I spotted a weathered LOT FOR SALE sign and a dirt road that descended into the trees.

I turned off. The lot was hidden from the road. Overgrown with ferns, it didn't exactly look like a real estate agent's hot property. Even if it was, I doubted that a prospective buyer would be scouting undeveloped acreage in the rain. The odds were good that the truck would be safe.

I parked and armed myself, concealing one of the pistols and my K-bar just as I had earlier in Cliffside.

As I walked up the road, I wondered what secrets Spider Ripley's pyramid held.

If I was lucky, I already knew.

* * *

There wasn't any traffic on Surf Glenn Lane. Still, I stayed close to the treeline. The rain was steady but gentle, and the trees were thick enough to keep me from getting too wet.

I started down the gravel road that led to Spider's pyramid. Closer in, the place seemed less amusing. I didn't like those opaque windows. Anything could be inside. Or anyone.

There was only one way to find out. Two sides of the pyramid were visible from the main road—one of them being the main entrance, which faced

the gravel driveway—so I went around the back.

No miniature sphinx. Just a little garden choked with weeds, several pink flamingos, and a pair of copulating ceramic gnomes.

I picked up the male, and I had to laugh. His equipment was way past elfin. The little guy was hung like a troll.

But copulating ceramic gnomes weren't anything to get excited about. The good news was that no cars were parked in Spider's garden, and that made me happy. It wasn't incontrovertible evidence that no one was home, but I took it as a pretty solid indication of same.

I spotted another door—sliding glass and black as midnight. Completely opaque. The only thing I saw as I approached it was my own reflection waiting for me on the glass.

It was a stone cold fact that I'd seen better days, but I didn't let my appearance slow me down.

I heaved the gnome through the glass and followed it inside.

Dark as a pit in there, and cool.

I took a deep breath.

Decay and death, with just a hint of pestilence. Exactly what I was looking for.

* * *

Four rooms on the first floor of the pyramid. Three of them were fairly narrow, one on each wall, with the fourth in the center.

The latter was Spider Ripley's living room—if a pyramid could contain such a room—and considering what I knew about Ripley, the decor ran true to form.

Circe had told me that Spider was a member of an Egyptian revival cult before joining her father's church. It was common knowledge that Whistler's own brand of religion drew heavily on the Egyptian beliefs concerning death and rebirth, so it wasn't surprising that Spider's pyramid was decorated in a style that could only be described as very late Egyptian...or very early Diabolos Whistler.

In a series of papyrus friezes that hung on the walls, a pharaoh who looked very much like Diabolos Whistler traveled the cycle of death and rebirth. The furniture was simple, black, and spare. There were statues and small idols everywhere, intricate portrayals of Egyptian gods and Whistler's own deities. Fortunately, most of the statuary bore small name-plates—a necessity for an

unbeliever like myself.

There was Bes, the Egyptian god of a happy home, a strange bearded creature who reminded me of the gnome I'd tossed through the window, though Bes wasn't quite as well-endowed. Bastet, the cat goddess, crouched at his side. Korthes'h—the hideous creature tattooed on Circe Whistler's back—loomed on a low table, hovering over Sakhmet and Anubis, Manth'ss and Krake.

Many of the pieces were museum quality, elaborate statues inlaid with lapis lazuli, turquoise, and carnelian. Even so, the room reflected an almost childlike sense of completion and display, as if Ripley needed to reinforce his faith by surrounding himself with icons. I could almost imagine the freakish giant acting out Whistler's modern mythology of new gods that slew the old like a kid with a set of very expensive action figures.

But I wasn't here to play psychiatrist. I climbed a staircase to the second floor. Only two rooms there, and they held more of the same.

A bedroom and an expansive master bath. I guessed Spider spent most of his time in these two rooms. Both had televisions and telephones...and several boxes of Ramses condoms, birth control fit for a pharaoh.

Besides that, the bedroom contained a kingsize-plus bed with plenty of room for the seven-foot bodyguard, a female guest, and its current occupant—a realistic looking mummy that on closer examination turned out to be a doll. Staring at it, I couldn't help remembering the all-too-real mummies stacked in Diabolos Whistler's study. Maybe the things were *de rigueur* when it came to cultist decorating.... Beyond that, I didn't want to dwell on the implications of a mummy—be it authentic or ersatz—in a kingsize-plus bed.

I didn't want to think about the sarcophagus-shaped tub in the bathroom, either. Or the Canopic jars with lids shaped like the heads of Whistler's gods that stood on the toilet tank in the pissoir.

No way was I going to lift the lids of those jars and peek at the contents. I left them behind, along with a collection of pleasant-smelling incense burners and scented cones that stood on a shelf above them, and I followed a sharper, less appealing scent that led me to a trapdoor set in the ceiling above the kingsize-plus bed.

A man of Ripley's height wouldn't have had any trouble reaching that door. I had to climb on top of the bed to slide it open.

It clicked into place and disgorged a black ladder that I barely dodged. Nothing was going to slow me down now that I was on the proper scent. I climbed the ladder and entered a cramped chamber that filled the uppermost

section of the pyramid.

Votive candles flickered here. Crucifixes gleamed. A wooden Christ spilled splintered blood, while a statue of Mary wept glass tears. The Christian symbols didn't surprise me. After all, I'd seen the crucifix eclipsing the ankh branded on Spider Ripley's chest.

It wasn't hard to discover the cause of Spider's latest conversion. The thing itself rested on the triangular black table in the center of the room.

An iron box covered with welded crucifixes, barred in the front, and padlocked.

The contents: Diabolos Whistler's head.

Dull, hazel eyes stared through ropes of long white hair that hung across his face. Whistler's left cheek had flattened against the bottom of the backpack during our trip, cementing his lips in a strange expression that could be a sneer or a smile depending upon the light.

He wasn't pretty. That much was certain. But I didn't much care how he looked. Diabolos and I were old friends. We'd traveled together. Talked through the long, empty night.

Or I talked and he listened. Diabolos was a good listener. Excellent company, as far as I was concerned. Hey, I'd duct-taped his head to the Toyota's differential and he hadn't complained one bit.

Oh, maybe he sneered a little if the light was wrong, his twisted lips curling cynically in that bristling white goatee. Maybe he was having his own private joke at my expense. But how far was a sneer from a smile? Really?

It was all a matter of perspective. Just like locking Whistler's head in an iron box. Perspective driven by fear, resulting in action.

Spider Ripley had taken action. The iron box with its welded crucifixes was only the beginning of his preparations. He obviously felt the trappings of Christianity would restrain Diabolos Whistler. Short of the Shroud of Turin and the Holy Grail, Spider Ripley had done his best to create a divine prison that would hold the darkest of the dark ones at bay.

I wondered if Spider had gone down on his knees and prayed in his secret shrine. It wouldn't have surprised me. Circe had said that her bodyguard was deathly afraid of her father's powers. Obviously, he believed the things I'd read in those pamphlets handed out by Whistler's followers—that Whistler's death would indeed signal the arrival of a new satanic age, and Satan himself would be reborn from the ruin of Whistler's corpse.

"That's where you've got them fooled," I whispered to Diabolos. "You're

a bright boy, all right. Getting them to focus on your head. I bet they forgot all about your body. You're probably busting out of a Mexican morgue right now. You'll snatch some other corpse's head, slap it on, buy a Toyota from some surf bum, come north and claim your head like a fallen crown."

Diabolos only sneered.

"That's the plan. Isn't it, buddy?"

I leaned in close. And that was when I discovered the final touch. A silver chain encircled Whistler's neck, the fine links disappearing between his shriveled lips.

I tugged on the chain and drew another crucifix from Diabolos Whistler's dead sneer, dislodging several communion wafers in the process.

Free of the crucifix, Diabolos didn't say a word.

I laughed. He still looked awfully dead to me.

I grabbed the metal box and blew out the votive candles. Darkness closed in.

I might have been in an empty room. A room that was not shaped like a pyramid. A room that held nothing at all.

It was a place I might have lingered.

I couldn't afford to do that. Not now.

I descended the ladder, leaving the darkness for the light.

* * *

I needed other answers, and I wasn't prepared to leave Spider Ripley's pyramid until I found them.

I didn't expect to be disturbed. Spider and his merry band were no doubt busy enough, and I doubted that he'd be heading home anytime soon. With his fear of Whistler's head, I was sure that Ripley didn't want to be anywhere near it unless he absolutely had to.

There were two things I needed first and foremost, and both were in Spider Ripley's bedroom.

A television and a remote. I picked up the latter and turned on the former. It was the top of the hour, so I was lucky. I found a news anchor who didn't annoy me, and I stuck with him for nearly twelve minutes.

In that time, many of my questions were answered. Number one was the identity of the flayed corpse I'd mistaken for Circe Whistler. The murdered woman was Lethe, Circe's sister. The network had dug up some footage of her—

home video shot at some club in San Francisco, along with a music video she'd made with some abysmal goth band (she was the nun in fishnet stockings). Apart from a pair of blue eyes and several hauntingly familiar tattoos, she didn't look much like Circe.

Who was said to be in seclusion in San Francisco. This factoid was seemingly verified by a clip of an old Victorian in the Haight. A limo pulled up, and a woman in a black crushed velvet cape got out. The cape had a hood, and the woman was wearing sunglasses, and she had enough bodyguards to handle a visiting head of state.

Circe's doppelgänger disappeared into the old house. A scab-colored door slammed closed behind her. Flash to a nightclub in the Mission District called the Make-Out Room, where a reporter was interviewing one of the owners. Sure he knew Circe Whistler. He knew her well. She'd spent the previous night at his place. They'd heard about Lethe's murder over breakfast, while listening to the radio in a neighborhood cafe.

I remembered Circe's comment about her father's use of doubles back in the sixties. I wondered what the going rate was for a doppelgänger these days, especially one that would have to spend a good amount of time under a tattoo artist's needle.

Whatever the rate, it probably wasn't as lucrative as the check Circe's scriptwriter was pulling down. I figured she had to have one of those, too, because the scenario for Circe's power play was brilliant. Not only had she found a way to eliminate her father and her sister, she was also creating sympathy for her church in the bargain.

She had fashioned a bogeyman—faceless, unseen, scary to anyone with a brain. The suspected killer was a member of the Christian right. Several media outlets had received communiqués from a man who claimed responsibility for the executions of Diabolos Whistler and his youngest daughter. He proclaimed his membership in a group called Jehovah's Hammer, and he said he wouldn't stop killing until Circe Whistler and her followers were dead in the ground.

This revelation was followed by a background piece featuring old footage of a debate between Circe and Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition. That was yesterday's news, so I started channel surfing. The story was everywhere. CNBC was deep into wall-to-wall coverage, concentrating on the murder-mystery game. The tabloid shows were getting up-close-and-personal, fighting over Lethe Whistler's ex-lovers—several aspiring musicians, a writer of paperback horror novels, and a cross-dressing basketball player who had dated

her during a brief stint with the Golden State Warriors. PBS was there, too, taking the high road. A bunch of talking heads were kicking around the New Hedonism on *The News Hour*.

That was a little much, so I switched over to Larry King.

He was interviewing an expert on serial murderers.

A man with a terminally pinched expression.

Right off, I recognized my old buddy Clifford Rakes. His voice was calm and considered. Anyone who hadn't heard him whining to his editor about waterbeds and dust-jacket photos might have been convinced that Clifford possessed a shred of intelligence.

"To deconstruct a killer's behavior, we must see things through his eyes," Rakes began. "The *how's* of a case like this are obvious—the killer has left ample evidence at each murder. It's the *why's* we need to concentrate on. Perspective is the key to motivation, and motivation is the key to capture."

I laughed. If Clifford wanted motivation, he could have looked at my bank account. I should have switched channels, but for some reason I wanted to hear him out.

He launched into his profile. I tried to rein in my anger as Rakes pontificated on my probable childhood propensity for bed-wetting, animal mutilation, and arson. My chest tightened when he talked about the sexual implications of a male killer who uses a knife...*and* takes trophies, namely a male victim's head.

I held my breath as Rakes made passing references to Jeffrey Dahmer and Richard Ramirez. But then he zeroed in for the kill, the infobite he'd obviously been saving for last. "Our killer is a religious avenger, a prophet who sets himself above others. He's part of a cult himself—Jehovah's Hammer—perhaps even its leader. Who knows how many innocents have fallen under his sway. He believes more will come to him as a result of the Whistler slayings. In the history of serial murder, I can think of only one killer who bears the weight of comparison."

Blood pounded in my head.

Rakes pursed his lips and continued: "The madman I'm speaking of also headed a cult and saw himself as a prophet. He was responsible for the destruction of a great many lives."

I aimed the remote at Rakes's head, wishing it were a gun.

"His name was Charles Manson."

I pressed a button. The screen went helter-skelter. And Clifford Rakes

was gone.

* * *

I threw the television against a wall, grabbed Whistler's head, and left Spider Ripley's bedroom.

I'd learned all I could from the one-eyed box. After all, network anchors don't believe in ghosts. They weren't about to run a bio piece on a dead little girl who lived by a bridge. They weren't going to tell me who she was, or what had happened to her, or if it was likely that I'd ever see her again.

But I knew someone who might be able to give me that information, if I could get to her. There were a few things I needed if I was going to manage that.

I found a stack of bills in a little office downstairs. I filed through the envelopes until I found one from the phone company. Just as I'd hoped, Spider Ripley had a cell phone.

I picked up the phone on the desk and punched in the number.

An electronic chirping sounded in an adjoining room.

I was in luck. In a minute I found the cell phone. I needed a few other things, and I found them, too. I stashed the stuff in a bag and walked to the Toyota.

Then I drove back to Spider's pyramid. There was one other thing I needed, but I didn't want to be spotted carrying it down the road.

Diabolos Whistler's head.

Diabolos was waiting for me. Still sneering, still in on the joke.

Some people claimed that Diabolos Whistler was the real power behind Charles Manson. The rumors had drifted around for years. That Whistler had fingered Sharon Tate for murder. That he'd funneled money to Manson, and pulled his strings, and made him do the things he did through supernatural means.

There was one other rumor worth noting. It went like this—when Whistler was reborn as Satan, demons would unlock the prison gates, and Charles Manson and his followers would reap their unholy rewards at Whistler's side.

Thinking about it gave me a chill.

Not because I believed it.

But because others did.

Because their belief gave them hope.

The rain settled into a steady rhythm, but I didn't let it slow me down. I returned to the vacant lot, wrapped the iron box in a plastic drop cloth I'd taken from Spider Ripley's pyramid, and stashed Diabolos Whistler's head beneath an umbrella of lush ferns.

The head would be dry for the time being. Not that it mattered. As far as I could tell, Whistler's all-too-mortal remains were already rotting. It didn't look like the old boy was going to make a comeback anytime soon, no matter what Spider Ripley or Charles Manson believed. As for me, I didn't care what kind of shape the head was in. Maggots could nest in Whistler's mouth, and the head would still be a valuable tool.

I climbed into the truck. Silver needles of rain beat against the windshield, washing away bugs splattered from Los Cabos to Tijuana, San Diego to Bakersfield, Fiddler to Cliffside. I notched the wipers from low to high and the dead things were taken by the storm as I drove toward Hangman's Point Drive.

I skipped the turnoff and took another road about a quarter mile down the highway. It ran at an angle, back toward Hangman's Point, though the two roads didn't intersect.

There was a trailhead at the end of the road, though no one was hiking in this weather. I parked the truck, got out, and trudged along the cliff trail that followed the coastline back to the hanging tree.

The storm was gaining strength. A brutal wind pushed me along, cutting through my clothes. Driving gusts of rain sliced me to the bone. I was soaked through in less than a minute. Another minute, and my guts felt like they were frosted with ice.

But there was nothing I could do about it now. I was wearing the coat I'd stolen from the deputy at Circe's mansion, and it wasn't much more than a windbreaker. For a second I wished I'd taken something more substantial from Spider Ripley's place. But Spider and I weren't the same size—he was seven feet tall and I was a couple inches under six—and I never much liked black latex, anyway.

Fuck fashion. I would have worn a dead German Shepherd for a coat and a roadkilled Chihuahua for a hat, as long as they'd kept me warm. By the time I reached the tree, I felt like I'd taken a swim in the Arctic Ocean.

One look at the ghostly witches swinging in the gallows tree told me that things could have been a whole lot worse. I did my best to ignore them. Ducking low, I headed for the deadfall piled near the historical marker. I crouched behind the twisted heap of fallen branches, slicked rainwater across my brow with one hand, and watched Janice Ravenwood's house.

Janice's Ford Explorer sat in the driveway, along with two other cars—a black Rolls Royce and a Toyota Rav 4.

The storeroom where I'd had my little tussle with Spider Ripley was on the other side of the house, so I hadn't seen either car when I made my escape. Still, it was a sure bet that the Rolls belonged to Circe. I wasn't sure about the Rav 4. Maybe it belonged to Spider Ripley.

Or maybe the owner was the man who stood on Janice Ravenwood's porch, nice and dry, watching the road like a good little soldier. A little red flare ignited near his mouth as he sucked on a cigarette, and at that moment I would have jammed the butt against my palm just to feel some heat.

But it wasn't the cigarette I wanted. Not really. What I wanted was the man's coat. Nice and thick and warm, and from the looks of him, just about my size.

I dug into the windbreaker's left pocket and found Spider Ripley's cell phone. It was soaked. So was Janice Ravenwood's business card. But I could still read the number and I punched it in.

Dull ringing shivered against my ear. The cell phone worked fine. Now it was up to me. My teeth started chattering and I clamped my jaw tight, thinking warm thoughts, telling myself I was by a well-stoked fire with a cup of hot soup between my hands —

“Hello?” Janice's voice was still a little shaky.

I didn't say anything for a second. I drew my K-bar, studying the gleaming edge that had sliced Janice's fingers. One touch from those long, slim fingers and she'd told me everything about my knife. Gifted fingers, or cursed... I wondered if our encounter had changed her perspective.

I said, “How's the hand?”

She gasped.

“Sorry about cutting you. Really. And I'm sorry about your kitchen, too. Some Plastic Wood and plaster, no one will ever know you had a gunfight in

your home.”

“Y-you bastard.”

“Yeah, but you knew that yesterday. Or you should have, if you would have had the guts to shake my hand. Anyway, that’s old news. Get Ripley on the line.”

I heard crosstalk in the background as Janice handed over the phone. It sounded like Circe wanted in on the conversation. I didn’t want that. Not yet.

I wanted Spider Ripley, and I got him.

“You’re dead, Saunders,” he said. “I’m gonna carve a map of hell on your face, and I’m gonna do it with your own fuckin’ knife.”

“You just might get your chance, Gilbert.”

“Huh? How did you know my name was—”

“Good Saint Gilbert. That’s what I should call you. Nice place you’ve got here. I especially like the copulating gnomes in the garden, and the sarcophagus bathtub shows a certain panache, but all that late period Egyptian stuff is a little out of step with the Sunday school you’ve got on the third floor.”

“You’re at my fucking *house*?”

“I’m at your fucking *pyramid*, Gilbert. I came for something that belongs to me, and I found it.”

“Don’t be stupid, Saunders. You don’t know what you’re messing with. You’d better leave Whistler’s head alone.”

“Leave it alone? Shit, Gilbert, I already let it out of the box. In fact, Diabolos is dying to talk to you. Here, let me get him on the line

Ripley swore some more. I sighed. The big guy was getting excited. Yelling. In the background, Circe was getting excited, too. Asking questions, trying to figure out what the hell her bodyguard was so worked up about.

A quick glance at Janice’s porch told me that the guard was distracted by the uproar. He stared through the cottage window, trying to see if there was something going on inside the house that should worry him.

I could only take so much. “Take a Midol, Gilbert,” I said finally. “And hand the phone to your boss.”

Circe came on the line. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but it isn’t going to work.”

“Oh, I think it’s working just fine. I don’t know about your daddy, though. When he wakes up, I’ll ask him.”

“That head is a hunk of dead meat. It doesn’t mean a thing to me. Spider was supposed to get rid of it.” The next part seemed more for Gilbert’s ears than

mine. “If he’d followed orders and fed the damn thing to the Dobermans like he was supposed to—”

“Like you told me—good help is hard to find. Spider didn’t do what he was told. Your guard dogs had to stick to Puppy Chow. So now we’re back to square one.”

She sighed. “I have a feeling we’re going to talk about money again.”

“You’re right,” I said, even though I didn’t give a damn about the money anymore.

But I couldn’t let Circe know that, so I said the things she expected me to say. “I have your father’s head, and it’s for sale. If you pay up, I’m willing to forget the way you tried to screw me. I’ll be on my way, and no one will be the wiser.”

“There’s no reason for me to pay you one fucking dime.”

“Then maybe I should call someone else. Say a few reporters. I’m sure they’d be real interested to discover that you aren’t holed up in a mansion in San Francisco. I’m sure they’d be just as interested to find your father’s head in a pyramid owned by a guy you’re fucking. I’m sure they’d hustle right over here to Spider’s place. Even that crew from CNN.”

“Do your worst. I can cover anything if I have to.”

“Maybe you can, but you don’t want to. I know that, and so do you. So don’t treat me like Gilbert Fucking Ripley. He may be fool enough to think you won’t sell him out, but I’m not that stupid. Neither are you. You nearly dug my grave. I can return the favor. You don’t want to play that kind of game with me.”

She didn’t say a word.

“Good,” I said. “I think you’re wising up. Now listen to me, and listen very closely. I want you and Gilbert to go to your estate. I want you to do that right now. I’ll call you in an hour with my price, and with instructions for paying it. As long as you don’t do anything stupid—like call the cops—we’ll make our trade and get on with our lives.”

“Cops are overrated. Yesterday I learned that the hard way, and I don’t believe in second chances. This time, it’s just me and you.”

“Now you’re being smart. You do what you’re told, and we’ll both get clear of this. You don’t, and I’ll haunt you like a fucking ghost.”

I cut her off before she could say another word.

The whole thing was a smokescreen, of course.

For the first time in my life, money was useless to me.

The dead don’t spend dollars.

I couldn't ransom a little girl's ghost.

* * *

Shivering, I watched the cottage.

A minute passed. Another, and another. Just as I was starting to worry, the front door banged open. Circe and Spider hurried to the Rolls. Janice hollered after them, but they ignored her.

Car doors slammed. The Rolls roared alive and fishtailed onto Hangman's Point Drive.

Janice was understandably upset. She obviously needed to vent. She screamed at the bodyguard, nice and warm in his big coat, but he only shrugged and flicked his cigarette butt into the rain.

Janice stomped into the house and slammed the door behind her.

My teeth started chattering again. The bodyguard lit another cigarette. The crimson end flared like a target.

* * *

A few minutes later, I hit the redial button on Spider's cell phone.

Janice's phone rang for quite a while. I let it ring. Janice probably didn't much like telephones anymore. I figured she needed to work up her courage before she answered, the same way you work up your courage before you stick your hand into a lion's mouth.

I watched the house. I tried to be patient.

Finally, a familiar click.

A handset wrestled from its cradle.

A hand entering a lion's mouth.

Janice said, "H-hello?"

"They left you all alone, didn't they?"

"N-no. I'm not alone. I've got protection—"

I chuckled. "You mean the guard on the porch?"

"How do you know...how do you know where he is?"

I tossed the dead guard through the window.

"I know where he is." I stepped over the sill and over the corpse. "Now we both know where he is."

Janice stared down at the corpse's broken nose. It was tilted at a piggish

slant, with the bone rammed into his brainpan.

Janice didn't move. She couldn't move.

Until I told her to.

I pointed the K-Bar at the dead man. "Strip him," I said. "Give me his clothes. Especially that coat."

She did, and it didn't take her long. It wasn't the kind of work you wanted to linger over if you were Janice Ravenwood, if every scrap of clothing you touched coughed up a dark panorama of psychic impressions.

I changed quickly. The guy was a little bigger than me, but the fit was close enough. Apart from a little blood on the shirt, the clothes were dry. That was what mattered most.

I didn't care about a little blood. As far as I was concerned they were my clothes now. The dead man didn't need them. Neither did his ghost—a dark, thin shadow that cowered outside, howling in the rain.

I ignored the dead man's screams.

The coat felt good, and warm.

"How do I look?" I asked.

"F-fine," Janice said.

"Great. Now get a coat for yourself, or rain gear if you've got it. I don't want you to get wet."

"Where are we going?"

"Across the River Styx," I said. "Just the two of us."

The rain fell harder now, sheeting across the highway. The storm was getting worse, and it showed no sign of letting up anytime soon. No way did I want to rely on a busted-up Toyota that had been to hell and back when Janice's new Ford Explorer was ripe for the taking.

The self-important scribbler didn't need it now. I was doing the driving. Janice rode shotgun, though that was a laugh. She wouldn't have touched a gun if one lay in her lap. She was that scared.

Maybe she was scared enough to tell the truth.

"I was supposed to be Circe's ghostwriter, if you can believe that," Janice began. "She had an offer in the high six figures from a publisher who wanted her autobiography, and she handpicked me to write it. How could I refuse? Slice up a pie like that, there was plenty left for me. My agent negotiated the deal and managed to make it a little sweeter. In fact, she bumped us over the million dollar mark. When it came to Circe Whistler, she said there was a lot more money in channeling the living than channeling the dead."

"Celebrities sell," I said.

"All I wanted was the money."

"There are lots of ways to make money."

"You're right. If you can kill people and cut off their heads, I'm sure the job offers just roll right in."

"Spare me the wounded sarcasm. You're a smart woman. I'm not much on metaphysics, but I read a chapter from one of your books. You can write."

"You know how hard it is to sell a book?" Janice asked, and it wasn't the kind of question that called for an answer. "It's hard. I know. I couldn't sell my first two. I had to publish them myself. I lost money on both of them. If it wasn't for my gift, I would have starved."

Her talented hands rested on her thighs, silver bracelets gathered like manacles. I knew Janice wasn't lying about her powers. When it came to psychic impressions from physical objects, I had no doubt that she was the real deal. She had to be. One touch from her fingers and she'd known all about my knife and the things I had done with it. There was no way she could beg, borrow, or steal

that information from anyone on earth, living or dead.

But with a wild talent like that, I didn't understand how money could have been a problem for her. "Seems to me that you could have made plenty of money with your powers alone," I said.

"Sure. But people don't want to know the truth. Not really. They can't take it. The truth isn't worth a dime. It's ugly. Pretty lies are the things that sell."

"And you sold more than your share."

"That's right. Pretty lies were my stock and trade. Bring me a couple grand and your dead husband's pipe, and I'd give you a show. I'd sit you down in a cozy little new-age parlor in front of a roaring fire, and I'd hold that pipe in my hands, and I'd close my eyes as if I were closing them for the very last time. I'd pretend to contact my spirit guide, Natasha Orlovsky, one of the Cliffside witches. Never mind that Natasha was never a witch at all, just a scared teenager who was hanged as a result of mass hysteria. Never mind that I'd never seen Natasha's ghost, or that the Natasha I pretended to conjure up was a recycled character from a historical horror novel I sold under a pen name for a quick two grand.

"Never mind any of that. I'd close my eyes, and I'd smile, and I'd whisper a few lines of college Russian. Then I'd tell my client what she wanted to hear, whispering in soothing tones that her dear departed husband was so happy in the afterlife, so glad that his widow had remarried that nice fellow who owned the hardware store, so pleased that she'd spent that extra fifteen hundred bucks for a burial plot near a fountain because listening to those sweet little songbirds splashing around sure did make his eternal slumber a lot more comfortable.

"If that was what the old lady wanted to hear, that was what I'd tell her. And I'd hold on to her dead husband's pipe, even though holding it was like swallowing poison. I'd think of the two grand the old lady had in her purse—the same amount of money I got for a horror novel that took four months of solid work to write. And while I thought of the old lady's money and how fast I was going to make it mine, I could almost taste the dead man's tobacco in my mouth, and I could almost feel that rough little lump growing inside my cheek, the one that turned into a cancer that the doctors hacked off along with a good chunk of jawbone.

"I'd feel the dead man's hate as his wife pretended she needed something from the hardware store, when he knew she only wanted to cry on the shoulder of the cross-eyed bastard who owned the place. I'd feel all of it, just the way the

dead man had felt it.

"In a finger snap, I'd live the day his wife came home with the news that the cross-eyed bastard was hiring her twenty hours a week. She hated to go to work, but she didn't see how they could turn down the income. And she was right about that. They did need money. He couldn't work anymore. Hell, no one wanted to go to a barber who was missing half his face.

"So he wasn't going to stop her from working. Or blowing the cross-eyed son of a bitch in the back room. Or whatever else she was getting paid to do. Because with her out of the house he could spend the long afternoons sucking on his pipe with the little asshole mouth the doctors had left him. Holding that sweet smoke in his mouth while he imagined his wife bent over a display of garbage disposals, giving it up for the cross-eyed bastard she'd marry as soon as she buried his cancer-ridden corpse in a boneyard with a fountain that attracted flocks of birds which would no doubt shit all over his tombstone at every opportunity."

Janice drew a deep breath and held it. If she wanted to confess, I'd let her. Maybe the time had come.

"That was why you didn't shake my hand when we first met," I said. "And why you didn't want to touch the backpack."

"I can't stand to touch anything anymore. That's what ruined me as a medium. After a while I couldn't hold the pain, and smile, and tell those pretty lies. It started to burn me down. I knew I had to make a change."

"What about your third book? It was a big hit, wasn't it? You must have seen some money from that."

"And I earned every penny. To make the kind of sales my publisher expected, I had to do a book tour. That meant dozens of interviews, and lots of people wanting to test me."

"Lots of little old ladies wanting to hand you their dead husbands' pipes."

"Exactly. I came home from the tour with a deal for another book, but I was burned out. I locked myself in the house for a couple months. I tried to write, but I was completely blocked. I couldn't stand to go out. Complete strangers seemed to know everything about me." She laughed. "It was my own fault. Like every neophyte celebrity, I'd given it up to *People*. They printed all my pretty lies, but that wasn't enough. People wanted more. They always want more, until they're done with you. All I wanted was to be left alone.

"That was when Circe Whistler entered my life. I knew she lived in Cliffside, but we'd never met. She called me out of the blue and suggested we

get together for lunch at her place. Somehow, I felt that I could talk to her. Or maybe it was just that I'd been cooped up alone for so long, I would have talked to the first person who showed me some sympathy. Anyway, I trusted Circe instantly. By the time lunch was over, I'd spilled my guts. I told her everything."

"Why?"

"I think..." Janice hesitated. "I don't know why...but I think that somehow Circe saw right through me, and she *made* me talk. I started to think that maybe...well, just *maybe* there really was some truth to the things that Diabolos Whistler preached, and maybe Circe, being his daughter—"

I laughed. "Now, that sounds like the prettiest lie of all."

"I know! It sounds crazy. I don't believe it—not in my head, anyway. But my gut tells me something else."

"Okay. Say you're not lying. Say Circe seduced you with dark promises of juicy book deals and large royalty checks. But something else must have happened, something that brought you to the point where you found yourself picking up the guy who cut off her father's head."

"When you put it that way, I wonder what happened myself."

Janice was quiet for a while. I left her to her silence, and I kept my eyes on the road. I didn't want to miss the turnoff. The rain was hammering now. Loud, hollow, ringing on the truck cab like it was empty, like we weren't inside it at all.

I flicked the wipers on high. They whipped back and forth, fast and sure, beating like purposeful metronomes.

The sound made me uneasy. I felt like I was marching in step, like something beyond my control was directing my actions.

Those thoughts were for someone like Janice Ravenwood. I tried to banish them from my mind, but they stayed with me as I raced forward through the storm, as the wipers lashed back and forth, keeping time, setting the pace. The tempo didn't slow, and neither did I. Not long enough to gather my thoughts or consider my actions. The wipers beat time, and my foot pressed hard on the gas pedal, and the truck roared forward, carrying us to a place we had to go, the only place I could go.

Then, just as quickly as it had come, the moment ended. Janice started talking again, her voice more confident now, as if she had come to terms with the things she had to say.

"I don't know how Circe manipulated me," Janice said. "If she has some kind of special power, I could never sense it. When I touched her, I didn't get

anything that wasn't already apparent. It wasn't so much what I felt as what I didn't. With Circe, it always seemed that a piece was missing somehow. Touching her was like seeing everything, but not seeing anything at all. I couldn't decide if there was something she was hiding, or something she didn't have.

"Our first lunch was like that. She invited me to her home. At the time, everything seemed so casual. Looking back, it seems the whole afternoon was calculated to put me at ease. Even though I made a lot of money on my third book, the first two had put me into debt. In the end, I barely broke even. Circe knew that. She had what I wanted—a big house, material things—and she knew it. Visiting Circe's home, enjoying good food served on fine china...it seemed that the world she inhabited was my deepest dream realized.

"I told her that. As I said, I told her everything—all about the stress caused by my gift, and the way the book tour had drained me...all of it.

"And then it was Circe's turn. She'd just been on the cover *Newsweek*, and the media attention was pretty intense at the time. She talked about that. And then she told me about her family. Her father and her sister, and the things they believed and the things she didn't. She said that they were destroying her plans for the church, draining the fortune her father had built in the sixties, and she wanted to be free of them."

"I guess she got her wish," I said. "And you helped her do it."

"Yes, I did. And I would have gone on helping her. After the *Newsweek* story, the autobiography was the next big step on Circe's promotional plan. Working on it, I spent more time at Circe's house than my own. She set up an office for me at her place. Every day I'd talk to Circe, write about her. At night, I dreamed about her. I began to feel that, in a way, I was her."

"Or the woman she pretended to be."

"Yes. Her wants became my wants. Her needs were my needs. When I did something for her, I felt that I was doing it for me, too."

"Right down to chauffeuring a hit man."

She nodded. "It seems so obvious now. Circe knew what I wanted out of life. The funny thing is, I never knew what she wanted. Not really. She pretended to tell me everything, but even though I felt as if I were living in her skin at times, I never understood the needs behind her actions. I never had a clue. Even after ghosting her autobiography, I really didn't know Circe Whistler at all."

I swallowed hard. Janice's words were hitting too close to home. Once upon a time I'd shared a meal with Circe Whistler, too. I couldn't help

remembering it, and the things we'd done in her father's bed in the shadow of that meal.

That night Circe Whistler gave me what I wanted.

The next morning she tried to kill me.

The turn came up quick. I nearly missed it. Mud splattered against the wheel wells as I downshifted. The rear end started to drift, but the tires dug in and kept us on the road.

"I feel better," Janice said. "Thanks for listening."

I choked back laughter. The grove was coming up soon. I parked the Explorer at the trail head, turned off the lights, and killed the engine.

Bleak shadows waited under the redwood boughs. Fat raindrops dripped from the branches and splattered against the truck cab like hammer strikes.

Janice's voice was a whisper. "Can I ask you a question?" Sure.

"Are you going to kill me?"

She stared at me, waiting for an answer.

After a minute, she started shaking.

I opened the door and stepped out into the storm.

"Let's go," I said.

6

As it turned out, the bodyguard's coat was overrated.

I stood on the bridge, soaked to the skin. Janice was just as wet—she'd climbed out of the Explorer looking like a model for an L.L. Bean catalog, and now she looked like she belonged in a homeless shelter. Still, she seemed younger somehow—her makeup washed away, her blonde hair plastered to her skull, her delicate hands holding an oversized flashlight that made her seem childish.

Thunder boomed above—an angry bear's growl.

"This is crazy," Janice said.

"Maybe," I said.

She aimed the flashlight at my face, eyeing me like I was a hungry grizzly. I was hungry—hungry for things she could tell me. I had a lot of questions, but now that we were here I wasn't sure how to go about asking them.

I decided to tell Janice as little as possible. "There's someone who spends a lot of time here," I began. "I want you to tell me about her."

"This is a bridge. God knows how many people have crossed it. You can't expect me to pick up an impression of just one of them. That's not why you brought me here, is it?"

I told her that it was.

I explained that doing what I asked was her only chance to stay alive.

And then I told her about the little girl.

Some of my words were lost in thunder, but Janice heard enough.

"You're telling me that the little girl you're looking for is dead?"

"She's a ghost."

"Oh, God."

"Like I told you before: I see ghosts."

"I sensed your power when I touched your knife. It was nothing more than a glimpse really, but I saw enough to convince me that you were telling the truth. I would have never believed it before that. I thought you were trying to scare me with all that talk about seeing Natasha Orlovsky's ghost. You just don't seem like the type."

"I'm not. When it comes to the supernatural, I'm a pretty hard sell. There's not much I believe in, really. But I do believe what I see."

"I wish I could see the things you've seen."

She sounded as dreamy as a schoolgirl with a crush, and I had to laugh. "Don't be so sure about that."

"But you've seen behind the veil."

"That's one way of putting it."

"Tell me..." She hesitated. "Tell me what you've seen."

I smiled at her. There we were, standing wet and cold on a bridge in the middle of nowhere, but Janice Ravenwood didn't mind. Not as long as she had a chance of unlocking an eternal mystery or two. She stared at me, waiting for answers with the eager eyes of an acolyte.

Janice's flashlight beam burned my retinas.

I reached out and took the flashlight from her hands.

My face was lost in the dark.

I turned the light on Janice.

I saw her clearly, as clearly as I saw the dead.

But that didn't mean I knew her secrets.

"Please tell me," she persisted. "Good or bad...I really want to know what it's like on the other side."

Her eyes gleamed expectantly. A woman who'd lived for years off of pretty lies, waiting to hear the truth.

"Later," I lied. "Later, I'll tell you everything you want to know."

* * *

I described the little girl. Her blue eyes, her blonde hair, her little *Addams Family* dress. I pointed to the spot where she sat, legs dangling over the side as she watched the creek for the splash of a steelhead's tail fin.

Driven by the storm, the creek rushed faster now. Dark and brown as the rain bled over the earth and the river drank mud from the shore.

The rising wind howled through the forest and gave voice to the tempest that rose from the sea. Though not so loud as the thunder. The ground shook as sharp cracks slashed the steady scream of the storm.

"We're wasting time," I said, and Janice nodded.

She sat on the wet wood in exactly the same spot as the little girl. Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes. A minute passed. Janice started to shiver.

The rain pounded down. Droplets stained her cheeks, glistening in the flashlight's stark illumination.

"She likes it here," Janice said finally. "She likes watching the fish. Steelheads. They swim against the current. They fight it. They have to fight it, because they have to get upstream, they have to—"

"They have to spawn."

"Yes. The little girl knows that, because her father told her about the steelheads in a letter. He promised that her mother would bring her to this very spot, where she could see for herself. And her mother did just that, and told her to wait for her father, and left her here all alone.

"The girl is frightened. She doesn't want to disappoint her father. She doesn't know him, except for his letters. She keeps them in a special place, bound with a black ribbon, and she looks at them when she feels lonely. Sometimes she reads them over and over, and sometimes she just stares at the pretty red envelopes, at the return address written in her father's strong hand.

"She knows that address will be her new home. She hopes she'll like her father's house as much as she likes it here on the bridge. She doesn't mind being alone here. She's used to being alone. She's a quiet girl. She doesn't have any friends at home. Her mother won't allow it.

"She waits for her father. She hopes he will be her friend. She stares down at the water and watches as a steelhead slices a dark ripple on the surface, almost close enough to touch. If she were only a little closer, if she reached out at just the right time...."

"I don't care about the fish," I said. "Tell me about the little girl. Tell me who she is."

"It's not that easy. I follow her thoughts like a chain—one link at a time. First her parents and the creek. Then the fish...."

"Forget the goddamn fish."

Janice leaned forward at a dangerous angle, as if she were trying to see her reflection in the brown water. It was impossible to see anything there. With a pair of living eyes, at least. But if you were staring through the eyes of the dead

"She sees her shadow on the water," Janice said. "She seems so small. She doesn't like being small. Everyone says she's pretty, but she knows they only say that to be polite. She's too thin, and her skin is pale as white corn, and she doesn't like her blonde hair. She wants to be someone else. Someone different. She wants dark hair like a girl in a storybook. And she wants pretty

skin, skin like no one else on earth.

“Skin like the scales of a fish, skin that shines and gleams like a brave knight’s armor. She wants that more than anything. She’s not going to look away from her shadow until she sees a steelhead swim through her rippling body. She wants to see that living mercury splash through her face and—”

“*Forget* the fish, dammit!” I grabbed Janice’s coat, afraid she was about to tumble into the creek. “I want to know about the girl!”

Janice cried out, and the sound was like a crack of thunder, as if something had snapped inside her.

I shook her. “Tell me her name!”

“It can’t be.” Janice shook her head. “It’s impossible.”

Dropping the flashlight, I pulled Janice to her feet and slapped her hard. I gave her one more chance to answer, and my tone of voice told her that I wouldn’t give her another.

“Everyone calls her CeeCee,” Janice said. “Everyone but her father. In his letters, he always calls her Circe.”

My fingers dug into Janice’s trim shoulders. “You’re hurting me,” she said, but I barely heard her.

A dozen conflicting impressions raced through my mind. The little blonde girl and raven-haired Circe...two faces becoming one, features joining around a pair of deep blue eyes.

But one couldn’t be the other. It was impossible. Their eyes might be the same, but they were so different. Not just the color of their hair—that could be changed on a whim. But the girl was dead, and the woman was alive, and there was no way to justify that they were one and the same.

“You’re going to break my arms!” Janice yelled. “Let me go!”

I did, glaring at her now.

I slapped her again. “That lie wasn’t pretty,” I said. “Now tell me the truth.”

“I *am* telling the truth!”

I drew back my hand. This time she didn’t cringe from the blow. She intercepted it, grabbing my wrist so that my palm thudded against her shoulder.

Her fingernails dug in and broke skin. “Let me go, you bastard!” she shrieked. “I told you the truth!”

The rain beat down on us. I spun her around and grabbed her from behind and she tried to squirm away. The creek rushed below. My arms closed over her breasts and she scratched at my hands, screaming at the top of her

lungs.

I told her to shut up if she wanted to live, but she wasn't listening anymore. I swore in spite of myself as her nails raked my flesh and my blood coursed over her fingers, and a fresh torrent of screams poured down with the rain.

But the screams did not come from me, and they did not come from Janice Ravenwood.

They came from the thing at the far side of the bridge.

A thing too tall to be a little girl's ghost.

I saw it, of course. Only in silhouette, but I knew that it was a dead thing. A ghost. Just an oily smear against the forest.

The way I was built, I couldn't help but see it. But Janice saw it too. She gripped my bloody hand, and her psychic gift surged through my blood, and she saw through my eyes.

Just as she'd wished.

The thing came forward, a black streak of shadow. Janice held me tight, her thoughts scrabbling inside my skull like a hundred frenzied spiders. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't. She couldn't do anything but watch, and listen, and wait. All she had to do to banish the ghost was let go of my hand, but she held on tight. Out of fear, out of fascination...I don't know what made her do it. All I knew is that she couldn't let go.

The thing took another step, stumbling in the dark, and then another. Blacker than the night, a shadow's shadow. A bar of light cast from the dropped flashlight lay in the thing's path.

It avoided the light, clinging to the bridge railing.

It stopped just a few feet away from us.

The dead thing's screams faded to whimpers. But it wasn't the sound that raised my hackles. It was the stink of death.

I took a shallow breath, and Janice retched against a terrible perfume born of murder and blood and the rot of an early grave.

Janice struggled in my arms, trying to break contact. She didn't want to see the world through my eyes. I could sense that. She didn't want to draw back the veil of death. Not anymore.

"Don't look away, Janice," the thing said. "I want you to see where your marble road leads."

Lethe Whistler's ghost laughed against the storm. Janice struggled harder, wet and slippery in my arms. She kicked the fallen flashlight and it

whirled madly on the bridge, white rivulets spilling everywhere, slicing the forest, spearing the night and the thing that lurked there.

The beam found its target crouching low to meet the light. A sharp blade of light speared the dead woman as surely as the one that had killed her, revealing her gristled ribs and skinned sex and a cleaved, lipless smile laughing under blue, blue eyes.

Janice broke free of my grasp and ran.

Almost immediately, she was swallowed by the night.

I snatched up the flashlight and aimed it at the dead thing. A snake of illumination slithered across Lethe's pitiless eyes. She said, "Kill that bitch, or you'll never see the little girl again."

I didn't have time to think. I drew a pistol as I spun away from the ghost. I aimed the flashlight into the forest, but its range was much too short to reveal the woman who had wished to see the world of the dead.

I couldn't see her, but I knew that she was there all the same.

I closed my eyes against the rain and emptied my pistol into the darkness.

The cold rain sliced my face as I trailed Lethe Whistler's ghost across a beach shaped like the blade of a reaper's scythe.

I did not follow too closely. I aimed the flashlight beam just short of Lethe's bloody heels, sparing myself the sight of her. The wind off the water did the rest, banishing the sickening miasma that accompanied her.

The clean scent of salt air washed the darkness, but the bracing smell did nothing to clear my head. A foghorn sounded in the distance, and waves crashed against the shore, but it was the thunder of gunfire that rang in my ears.

My left hand stank of cordite. Back at the bridge, I'd emptied a pistol into the dark forest. I had no idea if I'd hit Janice Ravenwood. If Lethe's ghost knew the answer, she wasn't saying. Apart from the threat that had forced me to draw my gun, she hadn't said a word.

That threat had been enough, because it was accompanied by an unspoken promise to take me to the girl. Still, I didn't know if I could believe Lethe had the little girl, any more than I could believe that the child was indeed Circe Whistler's ghost.

It seemed impossible. Circe was alive, and the little girl was dead. But if the little girl and Circe were indeed one in the same, that would explain why Lethe's spirit had attacked the child. Even if I couldn't understand the connection between the girl and the woman, Circe had admitted that she orchestrated her sister's murder. That was certainly reason enough for the hate Lethe had directed toward the little girl's ghost.

Golden sand sparkled beneath the flashlight beam. A gust of wind pounded against my back and knocked me forward a step, and the harsh light played over Lethe's skinned calves. Stripped muscles danced against ribbons of tendon and naked bone.

The wind changed and the scent of Lethe's pain caught me straight in the face like a stunning blow. But Lethe didn't slow down. She moved forward. Whatever her motivation, it drove her like a slave master's whip. Needles of rain stitched her shade, and the wind tore through her like an open window. She was nothing more than air, but the storm could not carry her away. She would not

allow that to happen.

It was obvious that we were heading toward the bottle house. I didn't know why, and Lethe wasn't telling me. She never looked back once. She knew I would follow her, just as she knew that she could safely turn her back to me.

Lethe had nothing to fear from my guns or my knife. She was already dead.

She pulled ahead as we neared the cliff, the same way the little girl had. Through the whispering beach grass she went, and up the trail, and to the cracked concrete stairway that led to the bottle house.

I followed as best I could. Icy wind blasted the cliff. The storm lashed my wet body as I crossed the patio, but the bottle house was not an inviting sanctuary.

Lethe waited in the open doorway. The wind howled through her, sweeping across the black maw while screams and gasps and moans echoed behind its concrete lips.

The sound was only the wind in the bottles. I played my flashlight over the rain-slicked glass, and told myself to get a grip. But what I saw wasn't half as powerful as what I heard. And what I heard were a thousand voices, as if a horrible party waited there in the dark.

"It's a party for the dead," Lethe said, as if she could read my mind. "But you're invited."

I stood in the storm, as cold as a corpse.

Lethe was trying to scare me.

For the first time in a long time, I hesitated.

Wondering if I was really as smart as I thought I was.

Wondering if I should be afraid.

Lethe smiled her red smile, and the black mouth swallowed her whole. Her voice joined the others, beckoning me inside.

A deep inhalation.

I stepped forward.

I crossed the threshold, welcomed by the cold.

* * *

Lethe pointed at a bottle in the wall. "Turn it," she said.

I did. A hinged slab of stone rose from the floor like a fallen tombstone intent upon righting itself.

I stared at the trapdoor, remembering how I'd nearly lost my balance during my first visit to the bottle house. At the time I thought I had stumbled, but maybe I hadn't stumbled at all. Maybe a stone *had* shifted under my feet, a stone that covered a hidden stairway.

Lethe descended into the dark pit. I followed, almost making a crack about forgetting my trick or treat bag, but it wasn't the time or the place for jokes. I was too worried about the little girl.

At the bottom of the staircase Lethe indicated another bottle set in another wall. Again I was told to turn it, and this time the stone door fell closed.

Darkness swelled around us. The chamber was small, reducing my flashlight beam to spotlight exposures. A small table held a cobwebbed tangle of junk—empty wine bottles, corks, rusted scalpels and moldy bandages. All this we ignored. Lethe told me to take a box of wooden matches from the pile. It was a simple task, but one she couldn't perform with spectral fingers.

Soon enough I found a matchbox, and we left the room for another. This one was bigger and somehow emptier, with wet stone walls and unlit torches set in wrought iron sconces, cobwebs and mold and a quiet, dripping echo somewhere in the dark.

Fat spiders sizzled in their webs as I lit the torches. I noticed that the wrought iron sconces were spiked and scaled, nearly the same design as the candlesticks at Circe's mansion. Soon the torches flared alive and forked tongues of flame licked the darkness, revealing redwood pews heavy with inky mildew and a black stone altar alive with white mold. Behind the altar hung an inverted cross draped in a veil of tattered cobwebs. Mushrooms sprouted from the crosspiece and from an iron pulpit that stood before it, overlooking all.

I imagined Diabolos Whistler standing there, young and strong, torchlight painting his sharp features as he stared down at the oblong altar.

An altar large enough to hold an eager supplicant.

But no ghost lay upon the altar. Not a one.

And no words came from Whistler's pulpit. But there was a sob. I heard it.

And then I saw her through a cobweb tangle. Behind the pulpit, below the cross. A little girl, hiding from the light.

* * *

"Don't be afraid," I said. "I've come to help you."

The little girl wouldn't look at me. She stared through the billowing black smoke that rose from my torch, her eyes focusing on Lethe Whistler...or what was left of her.

"Keep that woman away from me," the girl said.

I looked into Lethe's leering eyes and I didn't blink. "You heard her," I said. "Get the hell away from us."

"Anything you say." Lethe laughed. "Have your talk. And then we'll have ours."

Lethe drifted away like a red shadow, and I turned to the little girl. "Are you okay?"

"I'm scared."

"You'll be all right. That thing won't dare hurt you. Not while I'm here."

The girl sobbed. "You've got to take me away. I don't like it here. That woman...that *monster*...she says she's my sister. But my sister isn't a ghost. She's not dead. She's only a little girl. She's three years old, and she lives with my mom."

"What's your sister's name?"

"Lethe. She's named after a river from an old storybook my mom likes. It's a river that makes you forget."

I looked into Circe Whistler's young eyes. A dozen questions sprang to mind. I wondered if she had any idea what had happened to her, or if she realized that she existed in two worlds at the same time. I wondered what she'd forgotten, and what she remembered, and how much of it could hurt her.

I didn't want her to be hurt.

I kept my questions to myself.

But Circe had questions of her own. "Did I do something wrong? Is that why this is happening to me?"

"No," I said. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Tears filled her eyes. "I'm glad you're here."

"Don't worry, Circe. Everything's going to be okay."

It was the first time I'd called her by name, and she brightened at the sound of it. "Did you always know who I am?"

"Not always, but I know now."

"I should have told you before," she said. "I wanted to tell you at the bottle house, as soon as I heard that lady say she was taking you to my father's estate. But she scared me, and I was afraid to come out of hiding while she was there. After you left, I was all alone again. I started wishing that I'd gone with

you. I thought that maybe I could help you if you were going to meet my father. I'm sorry it took me so long to get to the house. I knew the address, but I wasn't exactly sure how to get there. I walked all the way to Cliffside, but everything was closed. Finally, I saw a map taped to the window at the gas station and—"

"It's not important how you found me," I interrupted. "What's important is that you did, even though you were afraid."

"So you really do know my father?"

"We've met," I said, because it wasn't quite a lie.

"You work for him?"

Now I did lie. I didn't have another choice.

"Your father is a very important man," I said. "He was worried that someone might try to hurt you, so he hired me to take care of you."

"Can you do that?" she asked, glancing over my shoulder at Lethe's ghost.

"I can," I said, and there was no way I would let my words become a lie. Circe believed me. Trust shone in her blue eyes.

That was good. I needed her trust.

"Can we leave now?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "Not yet."

She started crying again. She couldn't help it, staring at the cleaved face of the ghost who held her prisoner. "I know she's not really my sister," Circe said. "She can't be—my sister's only three years old."

"I know," I said, wanting to spare Circe from the truth. "But sometimes people lie, and ghosts are just people. Or at least they used to be. Ghosts can lie, too."

"She is a liar, and she's crazy, too. She told me all sorts of horrible things. She even told me that I was dead."

The little girl nearly broke down. A hard knot of anger tightened in my chest. I took a deep breath, but I was shaking badly and I knew it.

Circe saw my reaction. "It's not true, is it?" she asked. "I'm not dead, am I?"

"No," I said. "You're not dead."

I think she believed me. I hope she did. But when she reached for my hand, I took a step back. She couldn't touch me.

Not with her fingers. She couldn't touch me that way. I wouldn't let her try.

"It'll be all right," I said, but my promise was no more than a whisper in

the darkness. Circe was afraid again. She retreated into the shadows and hugged the inverted cross.

Gooseflesh prickled my spine as Lethe came closer.

“Make her go away,” Circe begged.

I turned and faced Lethe Whistler’s deathgrin. “What is it you want?” I asked.

Laughter broke her bloodstained teeth. “You can’t give me what I want.”

“Then why did you bring me here?”

“To talk to the man who can.”

She turned and started up the staircase.

I knew I had to follow.

“Don’t go,” Circe begged.

“I have to.” I spoke the words as quickly as I could. “But I’ll be back.”

It was a promise I intended to keep.

A stone grunt as the trapdoor fell closed, and I stood in the bottle house with a guttering torch in my hand.

I'd save the flashlight for later. One way or another I was certain to need it, and I didn't want to waste the batteries. In this place, the torch seemed more appropriate anyway.

After all, this was a haunted house. Lethe Whistler seemed right at home here, and she wasn't alone. She had mentioned someone else—a man who could give her what she wanted.

I wondered who that man might be, but Lethe certainly wasn't going to tell me. "I'll see you again," she said. "Soon."

She drifted through the stone floor, ghostly remnants of tattooed skin whirling around her shoulders like leaves made of midnight neon, and then the darkness drank her in and she was gone.

I fanned the torch at arm's length. No one waited for me in the shadows. I watched the door. Outside, the storm had diminished to a complacent drizzle. Without the wind, the bottles were silent.

Just bottles again. They couldn't howl or scream. They couldn't share whatever secrets they might hold. They couldn't speak a single word—with a wind, or without a wind. They were only glass. That's what I told myself. Or tried to, until the silence was broken by a deep, resonant voice.

"We meet again, Mr. Saunders."

The words echoed in a hundred glass throats.

A dark figure skirted the golden edge of torchlight.

It was a man. A cloak of shadows roiled at his shoulders, wild with bristling nettles. He carried his darkness with him, and it seemed to slice the light as he approached, slashing as silently as the sharpest of razors, leaving menacing refractions that lit the shadows gathered tightly around his throat like a wreath of spikes.

Tattered ribbons of light streamed upward from the torch, revealing the man's face—a collection of savage angles with an expression as uncompromising as a wrought iron spike.

The ghost of Diabolos Whistler nodded at me, and his barbed sneer became a smile.

I held the torch and held my ground.

"I hardly recognize you," I said. "But then again, I'm not used to seeing you with your head on your shoulders."

Whistler threw back his head, and for a moment I was afraid it would fall off. But the nightmarish collar held firm and he only laughed, a big booming empty sound that nearly made me reach for my knife—even though I knew that the weapon was completely useless.

"If I had to die," Whistler said, "I'm glad a man like you killed me."

"I'm glad someone's happy. As for myself, I'm still waiting to be paid for the job."

"You'd better collect soon."

"Why's that?"

"Because very soon my daughter will be dead, Mr. Saunders."

"You're dreaming," I said, and my words were as much for Whistler's ears as my own. With his cloak of spiked shadows, he might look different from the other ghosts I'd encountered—but that didn't mean he was different. No matter what he claimed in life, and death, and prophecy. If Whistler wanted to scare me, he was going to have to show me more than shadows.

I figured I'd make the first move for him. "You can't do anything," I said, plunging the torch through his spectral face. "You're dead." Amber flames flickered behind his eyes. "You're about as dangerous as a wisp of smoke."

"Smoke comes from fire," Whistler said. "And fire is very dangerous, my friend. I will kill my daughter. Mark my words."

The flames brightened, but Whistler's eyes burned with a zealous fire all their own. Instantly, I could see what had drawn people to him, and to his pulpit. The bastard really believed his own twisted gospel.

I drew the torch from his face, fitting it in a rust-covered sconce near the doorway.

This time Whistler waited for me, but I didn't know what to say. I'd never bargained with the dead, and the old man was shrewd. I wondered what he knew about his daughter, and how much he'd tell me, and if he'd be so foolish as to tell me the truth.

But I had no time for any of that. I had no time at all. A little girl was under the stone floor that I stood upon, held captive in a cobwebbed pit. I couldn't leave her there for long, wrestling with the questions that were going

through her head.

I didn't want her to find the answers to those questions before I did. So it was best to face the situation straight on. "I want you to release the girl," I said. "That's all I want."

Whistler smiled. "You want Circe?"

"Yes."

"Then we want the same thing." Whistler glanced at the stone trapdoor. "We both want Circe—only you want the girl she was, and I want the woman she has become."

That was the way of it. Two Circes, and I'd met them both. I remembered the little girl's blue eyes, so trusting, and the blue eyes of the woman who hired me to kill her father, so cold. I remembered the little girl who'd longed for skin that gleamed like a brave knight's armor, and the woman who covered her body with tattooed scales. And I remembered the girl's chill hand, a breath of nothing, and the soft warmth of Circe's skin, the steady pounding of her heart against mine as we lay together in her father's bed.

"I don't understand," I said. "How can your daughter walk in two worlds? How can she be both alive and dead at the same time?"

"Circe's mother and I were never close," Whistler began. "She was a disciple, a tool. Many women bore my children, but Circe stood out. She was smart, and pure, and strong. I sent for her when she was ten years old. At the time she knew nothing about me that I did not want her to know. She knew nothing of my church, or the world in which I walked, or the prophecy I was born to fulfill. But she learned soon enough. When she came to this place, her lessons began. And like all others who came to me, she gave me her soul—her immortal spirit.

"You have seen that soul with your unbeliever's eyes, but you don't recognize it for what it is. I do. I put my trust in Satan. He blessed me with a vision of a sanctuary made of glass and concrete. He guided my hands and the hands of my disciples as we built this place. Souls were taken here, souls I meant to keep until the glorious day of Satan's resurrection. Each disciple bled for me on the altar below, and to each wound I touched a cork blessed by the powers of darkness, and with each cork I stoppered up a bottle, sealing a soul pledged to me."

I remembered something the little girl had said. Something her mother had told her—that there were always people in the bottle house, even when it was empty.

“When Circe came to me,” Whistler continued, “I wanted her to know everything. Of all my children, I chose her to reign at my side. I took her soul, as I did with all the rest. I meant to protect it until the day of Satan’s arrival. But my own child betrayed me, just as she betrayed this place.”

Whistler motioned to the bottles, and for the first time I noticed that a handful of them were still corked.

He said, “When I moved to Mexico, the problems began. I left Circe in charge of the church, but she ignored my teachings. She turned mercenary, criticizing me for each dollar spent, as if destiny can be assigned a bottom line. For my part, I knew it was only a matter of time. I was getting older. Soon I would fulfill the prophecy that had brought so many to my pulpit. I knew my time was short, and my only concern was to prepare myself.”

“For your date with the devil.”

“You know of the prophecy?”

“*And the ruin of Whistler’s corpse shall be Satan’s cradle, and Satan will be reborn in flesh and blood to walk the earth once more,*” I quoted. “I read a pamphlet at the San Francisco Airport. That doesn’t mean I believe it.”

“Then you and my daughter are well-matched. She believes in nothing but herself. She sold my beliefs like a corner dope peddler, and she let this sacred shrine go to ruin. She abandoned it to vandals.”

“And with it, her soul.”

“Yes. That is the way of my daughter. That is what she has become.”

“I don’t care what she’s become. All I care about is what she was on the day she first came to you.”

“I will give you what she was. My daughter’s soul will be your reward when you have done my bidding.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Perhaps I should have a talk with the child myself. It might be amusing, discussing metaphysics with such a bright little girl.” He laughed. “Unless, of course, we can come to some agreement.”

I sighed, because I was one step ahead of Whistler now. “I think I know what you’re after.”

“It’s very simple—I want my head, and I want my body.”

I stared at Whistler’s neck, at the spiked black wreath that had mended a ghost. And then I stared at the broken necks of a dozen empty bottles, every one of them past mending.

The only thing that would fill those bottles again was the wind.

“Remember Mr. Saunders,” Whistler said, “I have a prophecy to fulfill. I can’t do that unless my head and body are rejoined.”

“It’s quite a concept. Hell on earth, with you the man in charge.”

“Not quite me, Mr. Saunders. I will be but a vessel for one much greater.”

“That’s pretty noble. But be honest with me—you’re hoping you’ll get to go along for the ride.”

“You’re a very bright man, Mr. Saunders.”

I smiled.

I couldn’t say the same of Diabolos Whistler.

* * *

Whistler had no further need of me. Like a true religious zealot, he’d preached a little sermon for my benefit and assigned penance for my transgressions against him and his church. Then, leaving me in the glow of his own particular brand of spiritual illumination as if I were some new convert, he’d gone wherever dead cult leaders go to ponder immortality.

For my part, I wished that Whistler’s spiritual illumination gave off a little heat. Meaning a dead thing that crawled out of a grave was warmer than me. I was wet and cold...and more than a little tired.

A stack of dry tinder was heaped by the stone fireplace—wood gathered in daylight and abandoned in darkness. I said a private thank you to the skittish trespassers as I heaped twigs and branches on the old steel andirons.

I took the torch from the wall and jammed it under the nest of dry wood. The tinder crackled alive. I sat on the hearth, as near the growing flames as I dared. There was no sense going anywhere. Not yet. I needed some time to dry out, and to warm myself, and to think.

And that was what I did. My thoughts rambled. Places they didn’t usually go. Places I wouldn’t allow them to linger.

In the end, it all came down to a question of belief.

Diabolos Whistler’s faith ran deep. There was no question about that. He saw himself as a collector of souls, a dark shepherd destined to be the devil incarnate.

His chosen successor couldn’t have been more different. Circe didn’t believe at all. Or so she claimed. But her claim rang true. For if she truly believed her father’s gospel, would she have left the bottle house unprotected?

I didn’t think so. If Circe Whistler’s soul were contained in a bottle, it

was my bet that she would have guarded it as zealously as her father guarded his beliefs.

I ran it around and around in my head. Circe's words. Her father's words. And all of it led me nowhere. I didn't know what or whom to believe, and I didn't like thinking about it. Cynicism had always been my shield, but now that shield was bent and battered.

I rose from the hearth. Maybe it was time to test my cynicism...and the tenets of Diabolos Whistler's faith.

A single test had occurred to me in light of Whistler's sermon, and it was a test that I was peculiarly suited to perform.

Because I was alive, and I could hold a knife, and I could see the dead.

I carried the torch to the far wall. At least a hundred open bottles waited there, along with three still stoppered with corks.

I sliced the neck off one of the corked bottles—sliced it clean, the same way a saber-wielding cavalier beheads a full magnum of champagne.

I waited, but nothing poured from that severed glass neck.

Not so much as a whisper of shadow.

Not so much as a trickle of ectoplasm.

Certainly no champagne.

I tried a second bottle, and a third, with the same result.

A soft wind filled the empty throats and gave them voice. Voices that did not speak, but told a truth that Diabolos Whistler would never believe.

I smiled.

I was no longer wary of empty bottles. I had no reason to be.

PART THREE:

FUNERAL IN THE RAIN

And we are here on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

—Matthew Arnold
Dover Beach

1

I slept by the fire.

Long enough for my clothes to dry. Two hours, maybe three. Not good sleep. Sleep haunted by too many dreams. Apart from a few vague and troubling images, I couldn't remember most of them. But I remembered the last one all too well, the one that had brought me sharply awake.

In that dream Circe Whistler strode the grounds of her father's estate, dragging the little girl she'd once been behind her—one hand fisted in the little girl's hair, the other clutching a wrought-iron hammer with a bristling claw that looked like a monster's fang.

The little girl screamed in pain and in horror of the woman she'd become. But dark-haired Circe did not slow her pace. She did not spare her younger self a glance as they crossed a wide lawn, empty and still, like a cemetery without headstones.

No headstones, but a freshly dug grave waited there. Open and deep, with Spider Ripley at the bottom shoveling dark earth at the very blue sky above.

Circe grabbed Ripley's shovel and left his big hands empty and useless. She laughed at the crucifix hanging around his neck, and Spider shrank away to nothing. His neck narrowed, his muscled shoulders drooped. The crucifix slipped down the length of his body, knifing the turned soil like a miniature grave marker, and all that remained of Ripley was a white carrion grub snared in a tangled rawhide necklace, writhing to be free.

Circe brought the girl to her knees at the foot of an open coffin that waited at the lip of that grave. "We're all alone," Circe said. "Just like Hansel and Gretel." The child screamed and struggled, but Circe was too strong for her. She forced the little girl into the coffin, slammed the lid, and drove spiked nails deep into the wood with the claw hammer. Then she slid the coffin into the grave and took up the shovel. Earth rained down, smothering boxed screams that didn't end until I opened my eyes.

By the time I awoke, the embers in the fireplace glowed a dim yellow. Blackened ribs of wood crackled and collapsed as the fire slowly died. I didn't want to think about the dream, or what it might mean. What was important was

saving the little girl. To do that, I had to give Diabolos Whistler what he wanted. I already had his head, though he didn't know it. I had to find his body, and join the two.

That was the deal I'd made with a dead man. His mortal remains for a little girl's ghost, a ghost I still couldn't explain. But I'd keep my part of the bargain. It was my only chance to rescue the little girl. I could only hope that Whistler would do the same.

If answers were to come, they would have to come later. I knew that much, just as I knew that those answers would come from the lips of a woman who boxed and buried a little girl's screams in a nightmare I couldn't escape.

I clicked on Janice Ravenwood's flashlight and stepped outside. There wasn't a star in sight, but at least the rain had slacked off. I made my way along the beach and into the forest. I saw no one—living or dead—at the bridge, so I kept moving.

Janice's Ford Explorer was just where I'd left it. That wasn't a surprise. I had the keys. Even if Janice were still alive, I didn't think she was the type who'd know how to hotwire a truck.

I slipped behind the wheel and drove to the vacant lot and got Diabolos Whistler's head. Next stop, the Cliffside Motor Court.

The NO VACANCY sign shone like a beacon, and the office door was locked. I knocked and kept on knocking until I roused the night clerk.

He wasn't exactly fast on his feet. I said my name was Clifford Rakes, and that I'd lost my key.

He looked me up and down. My clothes were dry, but that was the only positive thing I could say about my appearance. Obviously I'd seen better days.

"It's a long story," I said.

"Ain't everything." He shrugged and gave me another key. I apologized for waking him and slipped him a twenty from Clifford's wallet, which improved his mood considerably.

A pot of complimentary coffee sat steaming on the counter. I poured myself a cup.

"You don't want to drink that stuff, Mr. Rakes," the clerk said. "Let me make a fresh pot for you."

I told him he didn't need to go to all that trouble.

"As long as it's black and hot," I said. "I'm sure it'll do the job."

* * *

I used the key and entered Room 21 without a sound. Clifford Rakes was fast asleep. He didn't look quite so pinched that way. I turned on the lights, but Rakes didn't open his eyes.

He rolled over on his back and the waterbed kicked up a rippling wave. Rakes rode it with a satisfied smile curdling on his face, clutching a pillow in his spindly arms. Obviously, he wasn't having a nightmare. I wondered who the lucky dream girl was tonight—Jackie Collins or Danielle Steel or Jacqueline Susann...or maybe Barbara Cartland.

Whoever she was, Clifford's dream date had planted a tent pole under his blanket. I was surprised the little bastard had the energy—I imagined he'd had one hell of a day. Contract negotiations in the afternoon, no doubt accompanied by an instant advance from his publisher via Western Union to make up for his missing wallet. Larry King in the evening. Dinner and drinks for the whole damn house after that, with his publisher eating the bill.

Yep. Clifford Rakes had definitely earned a good night's sleep. It was probably a good thing I'd thought to bring the coffee.

I slipped the plastic lid off the cup and chucked the steaming black contents in the little bastard's face. Clifford screamed and sat up too fast. A sloshing tsunami surged beneath him, and the ensuing wake that rebounded off the footboard threw him back. His head cracked hollowly against the waterbed headboard, but I'm sure he didn't even feel it. He was too busy pawing at his singed cheeks.

"Oh, no..." Clifford said, and, "Oh, God..." and, "My face! Oh, my face! Oh, Jesus! You've burned my face!"

"Calm down," I said.

"But my face! You burned—"

It was definitely time to cool the boy off. I pulled the K-Bar and eviscerated the waterbed. Water burbled up from the wound. I grabbed Clifford by the hair and gave him a good dunking.

He was spluttering stale water when I finally pulled him out. In a second he got his eyes open, and I knew right away that Clifford wished he'd kept them closed because he was trying to scream and hyperventilate at the same time.

I dangled the iron box before him. Diabolos Whistler smiled through the bars, his dead grin alive with ants.

"This should cut short the introductions," I said.

"Please," Clifford said, and, "Oh, God—"

“Don’t start that again. Unless you want to look like our friend here, you’d better shut up until I tell you different.”

I gave the iron box a little shake as punctuation, and Whistler’s head seemed to nod in agreement. Rakes retreated to the far corner of the gutted bed, gasping like a hyena on nitrous oxide.

I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to cut him a bit of slack. He’d compared me to Charles Manson. He’d accused me of bedwetting and animal mutilation. And he’d done it on national television.

“Please,” he said, one more time, and I came around the bed and hit him hard with the pommel of the knife.

“I told you to shut up.” I dropped Whistler’s head on the night table. “It won’t do you any good to talk to me, anyway. You said so yourself—there’s no reasoning with a sociopathic religious avenger. That was the profile, right? You can’t talk sense to a human juggernaut. You can’t cut a deal with Charlie Manson.”

Clifford’s lips quivered. He opened his mouth. He couldn’t help himself. He wanted to try.

“No, Clifford,” I warned. “I make the deals. You go along with them, or else I’ll use the other end of my knife. I’ll add your head to my trophy case. I’ve always got room for another Philistine journalist, you know.”

That did it. A sour stench rose from the waterbed as fear emptied Clifford’s bladder and bowels. He pursed his lips tightly, his face flushed with embarrassment, and didn’t say a word.

“You’ve got to calm down now,” I said. “I mean, really. What would Barbara Cartland say if she saw you like this?”

He gasped. “How do you know about that?”

“I did a little profiling of my own, Clifford.”

I tossed his wallet at him, and recognition flared in his eyes. “You’re the guy from the pay phone—”

“Now you know me.”

Clifford stared at me for a long moment. He’d screamed and carried on. He’d even shit himself, but now he was getting a little bit of a handle on the situation. The wheels were turning upstairs. After all, he was starting to think of money. If he looked at it right, a situation like this could mean a cash bonanza. Crime writer faces down serial killer...like that. He’d be set for several weeks on *Geraldo*, if nothing else.

“But why come here,” he asked. “Why—”

“No, Clifford. It’s my turn to ask the questions. I only have one for you, really. For your sake, I hope you can answer it. Do you want to try?”

He nodded.

“Good.” I lifted Whistler’s head off the night table and stared at it. “I got to thinking about what you said on television. About trophies...and completion.”

Clifford nodded some more. Hell, he hadn’t stopped nodding.

“I’ve decided that you’re right,” I went on. “About completion, I mean.”

“You did?”

“Yes. Whistler’s head isn’t enough. I won’t be happy until I have the full set. That’s why I want you to tell me where they’re keeping the old man’s body.”

Clifford sighed in relief. This was obviously a question he could answer. “None of the local mortuaries would handle it,” he blurted. “Their reputations, you know. They thought that they’d lose business and—”

“Don’t give me the *MacNeil-Lehrer* version. Keep it short, like *Headline News*.”

Now I was speaking his language. “Okay,” Clifford said. “There’s a guy south of here in a little town called Owl’s Roost. Whistler’s people really twisted his arm, and he took the job. He told a stringer for the *Enquirer* that he was going to hit them for a good chunk of change and—”

“How far is Owl’s Roost?”

“About thirty miles south. Maybe thirty-five.”

“Good boy.” I smiled. “Now, there’s just one other thing we need to talk about.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t like the things you’ve been saying about me, Clifford. It’s as simple as that. You hurt my feelings. I think you need to develop a lower profile.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“Just this—if I ever see your face on television again, I’ll find you, and I’ll kill you.”

“You can’t be serious—”

“I’m dead serious. Remember that, Clifford.”

I hit him again, and this time he went out like a light.

He splashed down in the gutted bed. Water poured from the frame. The carpet was already a soggy mess. Soon the bed would be empty, and the floor would be a swamp.

I stood over Clifford. Killing him would be easy.

If I hurried, I could drown him in the gashed mattress...or I could simply cut his throat.

But if I did that, Clifford Rakes might come back to haunt me.

Literally.

It wasn't much of a decision. I tied him up instead.

2

Through midnight drizzle, I pushed Janice's Explorer for all it was worth. The coastal roads were narrow and wet, and when I came to the inevitable landslide I punched the gas pedal and tore past a knot of traffic and a shivering highway patrolman who was flagging for a late-night road crew.

If the cop tried to follow me I never knew about it. As it was, I didn't care about anything in the rearview mirror. What I wanted lay ahead of me, and anyone who tried to keep me from it was going to end up dead.

I was buckled in tight. Diabolos Whistler wasn't—the Explorer's seatbelts weren't designed for severed heads. Whistler's mortal remains bounced around in the padlocked iron box as I tore over potholes and hugged hairpin curves, but the old man didn't seem to care.

"Still dead and quiet as an empty grave," I said. "That's the way I like you best."

And that was the way he was going to stay, if I'd read the situation correctly.

Owl's Roost Road came up without warning, and I nearly spun out trying to make the turn. But make it I did, with a quick footwork duet on the brake and the gas that sent Whistler's iron prison tumbling to the floor, and when I was on the road and racing into the dark redwoods beyond I stuck to the gas.

Whistler's teeth clacked against the iron bars as I took curves too wide and too fast, but caution wasn't in my vocabulary. Speed was. Because speed was what I needed. I had no idea when Circe had scheduled her father's funeral, or where she might take his remains for burial. Hell, maybe the bitch was planning on cremating the old man's body, just to be on the safe side. Whatever her plan, I was sure she'd carry it out as soon as possible. No matter what she believed or didn't believe, Circe wasn't the kind to leave loose ends untied. The way I saw it, Whistler's body would be on the road and traveling fast as soon as the undertaker did whatever undertakers do to headless corpses.

A sign flashed by on my right:

ENTERING OWL'S ROOST

PLEASE DRIVE SAFELY

I did the former but ignored the latter, passing a post office and a mini-mall, a couple of sad bed-and-breakfasts, and a burger joint nearly hidden by a trio of logging trucks.

Another quarter mile and I hit the outskirts of town. Another sign on the right informed me that I was leaving Owl's Roost and should continue to drive safely.

Next came a sign for the Owl's Roost Mortuary. I turned down the gravel drive, my headlights washing a Cadillac hearse that waited near the front entrance.

An elderly man stood near the rear door of the hearse. It was open, as was the door to the mortuary. Bright light spilled from the interior of the building, back-lighting four pallbearers as they carried a coffin through the stained glass doors.

I couldn't see the pallbearer's faces, of course. But I saw their silhouettes.

One in particular.

A silhouette that was at least seven feet tall.

Spider Ripley, carrying Diabolos Whistler's coffin. As far as I was concerned, that coffin was mine. No one was going to take it, and pray over it, and bury it in the ground.

It was mine, and I meant to have it.

I stomped the gas pedal to the floor.

Rocketing forward, the Explorer kicked up a gravel hailstorm.

The seven-footer was the first to rabbit. He dropped his corner of the coffin, and his three companions were stupid enough to try to compensate. They tottered under the load as I crossed the parking lot, and the guy in back lost it and jumped clear just in time, and the two in front looked up just as my bumper fractured their kneecaps.

One went under the tires and the other went over the hood, splintering the windshield with his head as the Ford rammed Whistler's coffin. Whistler's severed head slammed against the bars of its iron cage on impact, and then the big metal box that held the rest of him shot forward like a silver bullet through the open mortuary doors, scything carpet as red as sacramental wine as it went.

Ten feet ahead of the coffin and running hard, Spider Ripley glanced over his shoulder. He didn't know what to do. The corridor was only twenty feet long

and the stained glass doors at the other end were closed, and the coffin was coming and I was coming behind it, and both were coming fast.

But the coffin was in the lead. It clipped Ripley's right ankle and he went down hard against the lid, twisting as he fell, his eyes trained on my headlights as he landed on his belly. He held onto the big metal box for dear life, grabbing the handles, riding the coffin as it skidded across burgundy carpet and smashed through the stained glass doors.

The doors exploded in a hail of flying glass—a rainbow smashed with a hammer—but the coffin didn't stop.

Neither did I. The Explorer ripped through the entranceway, splintering wood molding and kicking the oak doors to the side. The doors slapped against the walls with a sound like thunder and stained glass blood spit from a dozen little vertical windows that looked like bleeding gashes.

Gashes like those on the face of Spider Ripley. He stared at me as the coffin continued its wild ride into a chapel beyond the hallway. Roses and lilies eclipsed Spider Ripley as Whistler's coffin crashed through a floral display and into a platform that held another casket.

Which tumbled into the bed of flowers, spilling a corpse on top of Spider Ripley.

A fat woman that pinned him to the chapel floor.

My left foot mashed the brakes as Spider wrestled with the corpse. Roses and lilies spilled off him as he sat up. He stared at me as I stepped out of the Explorer, his eyes brimming with fear.

I pulled one of the .45s as a shot rang out behind me.

The bullet skinned my left forearm.

Sharp pain jolted me and I dropped the gun.

Before it hit the ground I'd pulled my other pistol. I whirled with it, firing, and the bullets caught the last pallbearer in the belly. He went down screaming and rolled around on the ground, his blood the same shade of burgundy as the carpet.

His screams were horrible. Only death would stop them, but I hoped the pallbearer wouldn't die. The others, too, the ones I'd hit with the Explorer. I wanted them to live. Not out of mercy. It was just that I didn't want to hear their ghostly screams.

Those kinds of screams never stopped.

I advanced on Spider Ripley. He tried to rise from his flowery nest but his ankle was broken, so he writhed there like a wounded bug among the

flowers.

I could finish him now, but something kept me from doing it. Spider scrambled away from me, crawling backwards until his elbow sank into the fat corpse's belly. A little deathgasp parted the woman's prim lips, and the scarred bodyguard grunted in surprise, and I laughed.

Just a dead husk, but she had scared a big scuttling Spider.

Scared him so badly that he couldn't move another inch.

I said, "If you've got a gun, get rid of it."

Ripley looked at me like he didn't quite understand. He didn't say a word. He just sat there and bled. If his buddy hadn't been screaming so loud, I might have heard Spider's blood pattering against the dead woman's corpse.

I pointed my pistol at his face. I was about to let it speak for me when Spider's hand slipped under his latex coat and came out with a .45, gripped gingerly by the butt like it was something that might bite him.

I took the gun away from him and tossed it behind me. It clattered among the pews and was lost in the shadows.

"What now?" Spider asked.

I stared at Circe's bodyguard. His shirt was torn open, and it was plain to see that he was still covering all the bases. As before, a crucifix eclipsed the scarred ankh on his chest.

The silver gleamed in the Explorer's headlights. I noticed that the upper part of the vertical bar was worn, notched like a key.

I reached for Spider's throat.

He closed his eyes.

My fingers closed on the rawhide chain, and I tore the crucifix from around his neck.

* * *

The pallbearer died. The one I'd shot. His corpse coughed up an oily shade that slipped between his lips and pooled on the carpet with his blood.

Just for a second. And then it slipped through a tear in the carpet and was gone.

I walked down the hall, my boots crunching over stained glass shards as I returned to the Explorer.

In the doorway—now somewhat bigger than it had been a few minutes before—stood the man who had opened the hearse for the pallbearers. Black

suit, white hair and neatly trimmed whiskers, and a professionally stern expression that rivaled Diabolos Whistler's. He was obviously the undertaker.

He said, "Those men outside are dead."

I glanced past the prone bodies, happy to see their crippled shades stumbling into the woods beyond the parking lot. At the same time the undertaker peered over my shoulder, investigating his own concerns—namely the battered doorway, the shattered stained glass doors, and the wrecked coffins in the chapel beyond.

"I suppose a discussion of payment for damages is out of the question," he said.

"You might say that."

He stepped past me and entered the chapel. Seeing his back, I was surprised to see that the old codger had a crisp white ponytail.

The fashion statement amused me, but it didn't do much for Spider Ripley. He was too busy to notice—wiping his slashed face with a length of funeral bunting from one of the floral displays. The undertaker stepped over him like he wasn't there and knelt before the woman's corpse.

She wasn't exactly looking her best. Her wig had slipped to one side, and gray patches of dead flesh were visible beneath her smeared makeup. Her mouth had been jarred open by the collision, and her dentures lay in a bed of pale pink roses.

The undertaker wiped them with a handkerchief. "Poor Mrs. Cavendish," he sighed. "We've already gone through so much, and it seems more trials lay ahead."

"She can get in line," I said.

The undertaker's brows wrinkled. "Meaning?"

I reached into the Explorer and grabbed the iron box that held Whistler's head. I inserted the notched bar of Spider's crucifix into the lock. A twist and the lock popped open. The barred door opened next, and then I had Whistler's head by his long white hair.

Whistler's goatee was peppered with ants. I brushed them off as best I could and raised the dead man's head for the undertaker's inspection. "This," I said, motioning toward Whistler's coffin, "goes with that."

"Very well." The undertaker smiled knowingly. "Very well, indeed."

* * *

The undertaker's name was Albert Parsons. I didn't like the smell of Parsons's work room any better than I liked his company. I didn't like show tunes either, but that was what blared from Parsons's stereo. Specifically, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*.

The music of the night.

There was no use complaining. I wasn't setting the soundtrack for this scene, no matter what I thought. The man in the black suit was.

Parsons bent over Whistler's coffin, tsking and tasking over the dead man's remains. I ignored the undertaker's running commentary. I didn't want to know what he was doing or how he was doing it, as long as Whistler's head ended up attached to his body.

I turned my attention elsewhere. Spider Ripley lay on a stainless steel worktable, his hands and legs bound with black funeral bunting. The satin pillow from Mrs. Cavendish's casket was jammed under his head. Fear shone in his eyes, black pupils pulsing as he watched the undertaker going about his work.

I imagined that Diabolos Whistler's tortured gospel was racing through the bodyguard's head. Ripley struggled as the undertaker fussed and fidgeted. I glanced at Parsons out of the corner of my eye, but I didn't look long—the stainless steel instruments that filled his hands made my gut churn.

But disgust was quite different from fear. I was convinced that there would be no twisted miracle in Whistler's coffin. As far as I was concerned, I'd tested the tenets of Whistler's faith at the bottle house. The result amounted to nothing. It would be the same with his corpse once head and body were reunited.

I was sure of that. Soon enough Ripley would feel the hard slap of reality, and I knew I had to get to him before that happened. I had to find out what he knew about Circe Whistler while he was still afraid.

Parsons came toward me, gore on his rubber gloves. "Excuse me," he said. "I need an instrument from the cabinet behind you. Can I get it myself, or would you like to do the honors?"

"Get it yourself," I said, and as he stepped behind me I asked, "How much longer to finish the job?"

"You say it doesn't have to be perfect?"

"Or pretty."

"Then I'd say about five minutes should do the trick."

"Hear that?" I took Spider's crucifix from my pocket and dangled it before his eyes. "Like they used to say at the Roman Coliseum—you've got five minutes, Christian."

Ripley didn't reply. He didn't have to. He bucked and writhed on the table and nearly fell off. I hit him once, hard, in the mouth. All of a sudden he stopped moving—everything but his eyeballs, which rocked and rolled as if they were trying to escape his head.

I dangled the crucifix above his nose, and Ripley managed to focus on it. "Tell me about Circe," I said, "and maybe I'll let you get out of here before Daddy wakes up."

Spider took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Behind me, Parsons closed the cabinet door.

Spider's eyes flashed open, and I recognized the cold cast of those black pupils.

I didn't like what I saw.

Spider said, "You're a stupid fuck, Saunders."

"Yes, you are," the undertaker agreed.

A pistol filled his gore-stained grasp. He told me to get my hands in the air and I did. Then he came toward me. I glanced at Spider, and he was smiling.

"What do you think, Albert," Spider said. "Should we do this fucker the same way we did Lethe?"

"I'm not so sure," Parsons said as he reached under my belt and took my weapons. "I've got a brand new trocar I'd like to try out."

"Whatever," Spider said. "Just as long as I get dibs on Saunders's knife... and his face."

A dry laugh parted the undertaker's lips. I felt his breath on my cheek. He was that close.

"I guess I was misinformed," I said. "I heard they had to twist your arm to get you to handle Whistler's corpse. But it looks to me like you're a true believer, after all."

"Oh, yes. I'm a religious man, baptized in darkness by Father Whistler himself. In fact, I used to be one of Diabolos's doubles in the days before he moved south of the border."

I wanted to kick myself. I'd recognized the resemblance—the long white hair, the goatee, even the stern expression—but it hadn't given me pause.

Parsons knew he'd put one over on me. He flipped his ponytail over his shoulder and smiled, a living mockery of Whistler's deathgrin. "Of course, I didn't really see the light until I met Circe. She provided me with a retirement job, financing my funeral home with funds from one of her less controversial corporations. I've always had a certain aptitude for mortuary science, but I find

it best to keep my religious affiliations to myself. That's the prudent policy for a man in my business. I've always found that it pays to be prudent."

"Prudent doesn't always cut it," I said.

Parsons arched an eyebrow.

A fraction of a second, a fraction of an inch.

The same amount of time it took to bury Spider Ripley's crucifix in the undertaker's eye.

* * *

Parsons got off one shot before I could finish him, of course. The prudent ones always do. I was lucky. The bullet missed me.

It didn't miss Spider Ripley, though. The slug splattered his face like a ripe melon.

I dropped the bloodstained crucifix on Spider's chest.

On the stereo, Andrew Lloyd Webber's Phantom sang of loneliness and desire. I stood on one side of the table, staring down at Spider's corpse. Ripley's ghost stood on the other. I asked him a few questions, hoping he really did know something about Circe, but he didn't seem to hear me at all.

The wispy revenant Spider Ripley had left behind didn't say a word. That thing was no heavier than a breath, and it stared down at its own bloody corpse, at a crucifix covering an ankh scar.

Spider's ghost tried to pick up the cross. Again and again and again, spectral fingers dipping through dead flesh and bloodstained silver.

I watched him do it. Maybe the angels in heaven watched him, too. Maybe the devils in hell had ringside seats.

But if they were there, I didn't see them.

I only saw Spider Ripley.

A dead man scooping up handfuls of nothing.

3

As I drove, Whistler's coffin did the shake, rattle, and roll in the rear compartment of Parsons's Cadillac hearse. I didn't take it as a sign of life.

I took it as a sign that the hearse wasn't designed for four-wheeling. But the black Caddy got me where I wanted to go—down the bumpy dirt road that cut through the forest where I'd first met the little girl and across the beach that led to the bottle house.

Dark combers licked the whitewall tires as I traveled a hard-packed strip of concrete-colored sand, following the familiar curve of the scythe-shaped beach. I downshifted as I crossed the dunes at the southern end of the beach, but it was still rough going.

Another fifty feet and the whitewalls threatened to dig their own graves in the softer sand. I pumped the brakes and the Caddy slid to a stop. As far as I was concerned, one spot was as good as another for a funeral.

Outside, the rain had returned to a steady rhythm. Beach grass clawed the cliff like angry fingers, whipped by a wind that promised more violence.

It seemed inevitable. Violence, leaving pain in its wake. So far I'd gotten off easy, with a rack of sore ribs and a bullet crease on one arm. But I wasn't out of the woods just yet.

The undertaker's trench coat wasn't much of a fit, but at least it was dry. I slipped it on as I climbed out of the hearse. Then I opened the rear door and pulled Whistler's coffin off the rolling slab that held it in place.

The coffin thudded onto the sand. It was heavy, but I managed to drag it around the front end of the hearse. There, in the glow of the Cadillac's headlights, I opened it, glad that the whipping wind spared me the stink of Diabolos Whistler's remains.

As far as I could see, the trip hadn't done the old boy much good. Whistler still wasn't showing any signs of life. His body lay twisted—knees cocked south, shoulders hunched toward the north. But Whistler's head was the big problem—it lolled on his neck, frayed as a worn doll's.

Parsons's unfinished stitchery lay in a tangle on Whistler's Adam's apple like some horrible spider-web tie, while the undertaker's threaded needle speared

in the dead Satanist's cheek as if it were a meaty pincushion.

I jerked the needle free and set to work. After all, a deal was a deal. I intended to keep my end of the bargain. I could only hope that Whistler's shade would do the same.

Whistler's corpse didn't so much as twitch while I worked. I glanced at up at the bottle house, looming on the cliff like the last loose tooth in a skeleton's jawbone. The bottles twinkled weakly and an orange glow was slowly swallowed by the blackening entranceway—a trick of light as the fire I'd built earlier died in the hearth.

Diabolos Whistler's ghost was up there somewhere. I was sure of that. So were his daughters—Lethe and Circe—at least the part of Circe that I cared about.

I finished my preparations. There was no way I could drag Whistler's heavy coffin up the twisting trail. Anything that was going to happen would have to happen here on the beach. I tried to rouse Whistler's shade. My shouts rang in the night, but the wind brought me no answer.

I wondered if Whistler waited in the temple he had helped build with his own hands, watching for the first sign of the dark miracle he saw as his destiny. I didn't doubt that Whistler truly believed his own prophecy, as did Spider Ripley and so many others who had surrendered themselves and their faith to the old man.

But faith could only take you so far. No matter what you believed, no matter what god you worshipped. Sooner or later you had to trust your eyes and not your heart.

For Diabolos Whistler and his followers, that moment was now. Whistler's remains lay in a coffin like any other, a big metal box with a heavy lid designed to hide the truth. But the lid of Whistler's coffin was open, and the rain beat down and made puddles of his hollowed eyes, spilling trickles that traveled his deeply lined cheeks like tears.

Behind me, I heard a sob.

I turned and saw Whistler's ghost, that spiked collar of shadow still holding his severed head to his body like a twisted crown.

Our eyes met. For the briefest moment I saw everything Whistler hid there—the wounded pride, the hurt, the shame and the anger. All of it roiling inside a body that was as substantial as a child's breath lost on the wind.

By the time the next raindrop struck my face, Whistler managed to mask his pain. He stared into the box that held nothing resembling a miracle, and his

voice rang out as if he were preaching from his iron pulpit. "I have spent a great many years waiting for the dark one to choose His moment," he said. "I can wait a little longer, if need be."

"I can't," I said. "I kept my end of the bargain. Now it's your turn."

"Very well." Whistler's tone was dismissive. "Take what you've come for."

He didn't have to tell me twice. I grabbed a flashlight from the hearse and slammed the door, but Whistler only had eyes for his corpse. Even now, his faith refused to die. "It won't matter what you do," he said. "Very soon, it won't matter at all. Take the child, if that is what you want. Take her and be done with it—"

"No!"

It was a single word, but it sounded like a scream, and it came from a thicket of beach grass near the trail. Lethe Whistler's ghost crossed the hard wall of light thrown by the hearse's headlights, a nightmare of bone and gore on stark display.

"He takes nothing," Lethe said. "Not until we have what we want."

Whistler's gaze did not stray from his casket. "Satan will choose His own time, daughter," he said.

Lethe stared at her father's corpse as he rambled on. She was dead and I was alive, but we saw the same thing when we looked into Diabolos Whistler's coffin—the rot, the haphazardly stitched neck—all the cruel rewards of a prophecy that would never be fulfilled.

Lethe had no more patience for her father's words.

The moment had arrived, and she'd reached her own conclusion.

She said, "You lied, father."

Lethe started toward me, cleaved cheekbones gleaming in the flashlight's glow. "I don't know what your game is," she said. "I don't know what's between you and my sister and that little girl, but you're not walking out of here, and you're not taking her with you."

"My bargain was with your father," I said. "Besides, there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"But I can do something to that little girl. I'll finish the job I started, only this time I'll rip her to shreds."

"You'll do nothing, Lethe," Whistler commanded.

Blue irises flashed in her bloody face. "Quiet father," she warned, "or you'll go first."

She started up the trail. The beach grass lashed her like long knives, like the deep pain of disappointment and betrayal that sliced her heart.

There was nothing I could do to stop her.

But Whistler could. A cold gust of wind blasted over the waves and the beach, and Whistler welcomed its gray embrace. His bristling cloak flared like a catclaw thicket come to life as he rose on the storm, and he closed on his daughter from above, gathering the cloak around her like a net of midnight, wrapping her in his unforgiving embrace.

Lethe fought him, and the sound was the scream of a hurricane. Bony gullies appeared in Whistler's cloak as she struggled, scratching for freedom, tearing a window in blackness darker than midnight.

The wind tumbled them both. A vein of scarlet spouted from the shroud—Lethe's arm, skinless fingers scrabbling a brutal path to her father's spiked neck. Something spilled from Whistler's wounds, something as dark and shiny as blood, and father and daughter were caught in a twister of it, a razored whirlwind of lashing nettles that sliced the dead deeper than the truth, so much deeper, slashing a relentless path until the only thing that remained was a tattered black vapor that whipped through the beach grass like a shadow fleeing the light.

The storm was the master now. It carried father and daughter into the night and past it, leaving behind the beach and the hearse and the boxed thing that would never move.

I stood alone in the rain.

I didn't know where Whistler and his daughter had gone. I didn't care.

I only cared about what they had left behind.

* * *

The little girl waited for me in Whistler's ruined chapel, still hiding behind that cobwebbed cross. "I knew you'd come back," she said.

"I always keep my promises."

"Then you've got one more promise to keep."

"What's that?"

Circe smiled. "Take me away from here."

Her delicate fingers crossed through the cobwebs without rustling them, but I hardly noticed. I was so happy to see a smile on her face, so happy that she was safe, that I reached out for her hand without thinking.

Our fingertips came together like magnets. Circe's hand passed through

mine. There was nothing I could do to stop it.

The chill of her fingers sent an ache through my bones. I curled my fingers into a fist. Blood pounded in my hand, but there was no warmth in it.

And there was no warmth in the little girl's eyes. No more. It was gone.

"You lied to me," she said.

"No." I swallowed hard, knowing that it was too late, but going on all the same. "I didn't lie. I didn't mean to—"

Her hand passed through mine again, and the coldness froze the lie in my throat.

"It's true," she said. "I'm dead. I'm a ghost."

"I didn't want to hurt you," I explained. "That's why I didn't tell you the truth. That's why I lied."

We sat there in silence. The only sounds were the guttering torch and the girl's sobs, but it seemed I heard the pounding of my heart.

"You shouldn't stay here," I said finally.

"I won't. I'll go back to the bridge."

"That's good."

I took the torch from the wall and started up the stairs. We left the bottle house together and crossed the beach to the trail that led into the woods.

No breadcrumbs there, but we both knew where the trail led. To a special place, a place where the little girl belonged.

I wished I could go there with her.

Circe felt the same way. "Please come with me," she said.

"Not now. There's something I have to do. But I'll be back."

She looked away quickly, but not quickly enough. I saw the doubt in her eyes.

"Don't tell me any more lies," she said. "All I want is the truth."

I nodded.

The truth was all I wanted, too. One woman could give it to me. Her name was Circe Whistler.

PART FOUR:

I BURY THE LIVING

I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course.

—Shakespeare

King Lear

Act III, Scene VII

1

Cerberus's teeth gleamed in the harsh glow of the hearse's headlights.

But I wasn't looking for a bronze dog. I flicked a lever near the steering wheel and the headlights flared to bright, blinding the guards lurking in the shadows near the rear gate of Circe's compound.

Two men with black robes and very large guns. They looked like Spider Ripley's brothers, and maybe they were. Maybe they were waiting for Spider to show up in a big black hearse.

The men exchanged glances and a few words, standing there like a couple of bowling pins.

A seven-ten split.

It was an easier pickup then I'd had at the funeral home. I slammed my foot against the gas pedal. Cerberus's bronze teeth savaged the Caddy's left front fender as I clipped the statue. Gunfire pitted the windshield. But it was too late.

I picked up the spare.

* * *

The guards disappeared under the Caddy's front bumper, and I crashed through the electronic gate on whitewalls stained red with blood.

Only a brick footpath on the other side, but it would have to do. The main entrance to Circe Whistler's estate was heavily guarded, with another gate in the way. The odds of making it through that gate alive—and down the winding driveway, and into the mansion itself—were short.

I needed a direct route, like the one I'd used at the funeral home. This was it. Past braided vines and ferns and orchids and hanging fuchsias, Cadillac hearse on brick staircase, Detroit steel screaming against wrought iron railings, fenders kicking up sparks that rained down on the dark windshield like dying fireflies.

Hi-beams splashed black water. The swimming pool was just ahead. I cut the wheel sharply, tires digging through a patch of orchids like four wild dogs, and the hearse went into a power slide.

Driven by too much weight. I'd misjudged badly, and all I could do was bail.

Shoulder first, I landed hard in the churned earth. The Cadillac rushed on without me. I didn't have time to watch it go. Flaring taillights painted my hands the darkest red as I pawed the soil, trying to get up.

A quick glance beyond the taillights as I rose.

Men sprinted around the side of Circe's mansion, drawing guns as they ran.

I was almost up, but almost wasn't going to cut it.

The hearse hit the water with a thunderous slap.

A curtain of water rose from the pool, and Circe's guards were lost behind it.

Just another second and I'd have my feet under me.

Gunfire ripped through the wall of water.

My right foot slipped on a pulped orchid and I dropped to one knee.

Water splashed down on me, pasting lank white hair to my shoulders.

Flashlight beams seared my face like lightning strikes. Circe's men recognized me. The first one whispered a prayer. The second dropped to his knees.

The third squinted at me. Raised his pistol. Said, "Wait one fucking minute—"

I shot number three twice in the chest. He fell forward as I rose, pistols bucking in my hands while I cut down his companions.

The guards' guns clattered against the cement. Two splashes in the pool. Two dead men bobbing like Halloween apples.

A white arc of light pierced the deep water. A sinking flashlight. I watched it hit bottom.

Four more guards turned the corner of the house. For a second, they thought they knew who I was. A second was all I needed. I killed them where they stood.

* * *

Ghosts stumbled into the woods, and writhed on the cement patio, and swam like drowning things in the black water of Circe's swimming pool.

I ignored the spirits of the dead. Moving fast, I scavenged a couple of pistols from the fallen guards, along with extra ammunition. Then I tossed a

deckchair through one of the glass doors and entered Circe's mansion.

So far, I'd been lucky. The guards at the gate had hesitated when they saw the hearse, thinking that I might be Spider Ripley. Their counterparts at the pool had hesitated for another reason—they thought that I was a dead man reborn.

I had only fooled Circe's men for a moment, but in that moment they had mistaken me for her father. Not that I looked like Diabolos Whistler. But I was wearing his double's face.

I'd carved it off the undertaker's skull before leaving the Owl's Roost Mortuary, and now I wore it like a monster mask. Long white hair hanging halfway down my back, my mouth surrounded by a dead man's bristling goatee—the horrible disguise wouldn't fool anyone with 20/20 vision and an ounce of sense, but it was enough to freeze a true believer's circuits for just a second.

That second was all I needed to get the upper hand.

I sucked a breath through the undertaker's dead lips as I crossed the dining room. I was sure that Circe was in the house—the property wouldn't have been so heavily guarded if she had pulled up stakes and run. And Circe Whistler wasn't the kind to run.

Inside the mansion, silence hung heavy in the air. No frightened voices, no bodyguards shouting orders. If any guards remained, they weren't showing themselves.

If they were here, I'd take them the way I took the others. I was sure of that. I had two pistols, extra ammunition clips in my pockets, and a K-bar knife jammed under my belt. As long as I could hide behind a dead man's face, as long as I could count on a single moment of hesitation, the odds were on my side.

Pistols gripped tightly in my hands, I stepped into the long shadows of the living room. I paused as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The large windows that faced the Pacific came into view. Leaden clouds above a black horizon, silhouetting furniture...and a bonsai tree on a low table...and a spiked wrought iron staircase twisting upwards.

Upstairs...that was where I wanted to go.

A staccato slash of raindrops rattled against the windows.

I drew a deep breath.

Held it in silence...lost it with a single sound. A scrabbling of claws near the bonsai tree. A throaty growl as a black shadow launched itself in my direction.

Fangs ripped across my shoulder, chewing a path to my throat.

* * *

The guard dog drove me back into the dining room.

My pistols thundered, and three .45 slugs ripped the Doberman apart, and the dog hit the dining table in sections.

A wet red fire raged over my right shoulder. The dog's teeth had torn flesh and muscle, and I was bleeding badly.

But I couldn't slow down. I hurried through the doorway, toward the spiked, twisting staircase.

That sound again, like wild castanets—dog claws on polished oak.

Two guns in two hands. Instinctively I raised them both, and my wounded shoulder exploded in agony.

I stumbled toward the windows. The room spun and threatened to go black. I hesitated for a moment, just to steady myself, but it was a moment I couldn't afford to waste.

Because Circe's guard dogs didn't hesitate for an instant. They closed on me from different directions, three of them, the scent of my blood burning in their black nostrils.

The dogs didn't mistake me for Diabolos Whistler.

They were smarter than that.

They scented a man's blood, not the blood of Satan.

The first dog jumped at me, jaws stretched impossibly wide.

I clenched the pistol in my left hand and jerked the trigger as fast as I could. A .45 slug severed an angry bark as the Doberman's black head exploded in midair. Teeth and bone chattered against the hardwood floor and the dog thudded dead at my feet, blood pumping over my shoes as the second canine launched itself.

Black lips peeled over barbed white teeth.

I pulled the trigger.

A bullet clipped the dog's ear.

Yelping, it slammed into me like a bag of cement.

I fell back, still firing, and the dog's ribs became a red hole, its heart a shredded mess scorched by muzzle flash.

The dog was so much dead weight now, but it carried momentum, momentum that drove me backward.

I lost my balance and the third dog hit me, teeth grinding against my

right biceps as its jaws clamped down, hot exhalations blasting my mutilated shoulder as I pumped lead into its belly and we went back, back, back—

And I crashed against the staircase, and my skull cracked against the wrought-iron bars, and my breath exploded from my lungs as if I'd never draw another, and the wounded dog's weight carried it down but I could not go with it.

I was pinned to the twisted staircase.

Impaled on the spiked bars like an insect on display.

A dagger of wrought iron burrowed deep in my right shoulder. Another spike bit lower, a thick brutal shaft trapped by my ribs, my bones scissored around it so that the wrought-iron spear sliced my guts every time I drew a breath. But I had to breathe. As long as I was alive, I had to—I dropped both pistols.

The dying dog panted at my feet in a puddle of its own blood, and then it breathed its last.

Silence closed around me like a shadow. A black silence, broken only by black sounds.

The buzzing of flies.

And inside that sound—almost lost in its icy shiver—another.

A siren's call.

A call I had already answered.

* * *

The lights came on. Circe slapped my cheek.

The undertaker's cheek. She fingered gashed eyelids and pulled the flesh mask from my face. Flies took to it as if it were honey, and she tossed it away.

The undertaker's face smacked wetly on the floor, twisted and deflated, and flies peppered it until it was black.

Nothing but dead meat. But at least the face was good for something. So few things in this world are.

Circe agreed, but for a different reason. "I've got to hand it to you—using old Albert's face was a smart move. You certainly fooled my guards. You didn't fool me, though. But don't feel bad about that—I've worn a mask or two in my time. I know all the tricks."

She smiled, cold and dark and beautiful in jeans and a black crushed velvet top that clung to her like a second skin. I wondered if she'd worn the velvet just for me. Just to make me pay for my insolence.

“I think you’ll take a long time to die,” she said.

Her black nails scraped torn flesh as she brushed flies away from my wounded shoulder. I sucked a shallow breath, and brittle pain shot through me like a bullet.

My blood pattered against the hardwood floor.

The flies took to my shoulder as soon as Circe’s hand slipped away, but she didn’t notice. She was transfixed by the dead man’s face on the floor, a face as empty as Diabolos Whistler’s dream.

“My father’s not coming back, of course,” she said. “He never was. But then, you knew that, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“I really like you,” she said. “That’s the funny thing. You’re a rock. No last minute conversions, no begging, no prayers. You’re down to counting your breaths the way an old man counts his birthdays, and you still don’t believe in anything. Do you?”

I shook my head.

“Not God?”

I shook it again.

“Not Satan?”

Circe’s blue eyes flashed before I could respond.

She opened her mouth, opened it wider than before, but she did not speak a word.

Fat flies crawled from the dark pit of her throat, crawled over her pink tongue, and took wing on air that stank of blood.

“I think I could change your mind, Clay. Not about God. But about Satan...Lord of the Flies.”

I drew another breath, counting it the way an old man counts another birthday, and when I let it go it was gone and there was no getting it back again.

“If there’s something you want to tell me,” I whispered, “you’d better make it fast.”

“Oh, we’ve got a little time yet,” Circe said. “Enough for a bedtime story.”

I closed my eyes and listened.

“Once upon a time, there was a little girl,” Circe began. “She had a whore for a mother and a charlatan for a father, but she was special all the same. Her name was Circe, and she was a child of prophecy, born to hear a siren’s call.

“One day her mother left her all alone on a bridge. The little girl sat there

and waited for her father. She waited very patiently, staring down at the clear water rushing in the creek below, watching fish as they swam upstream to die.

“The fish were so pretty, strong and sleek as they hurried toward death. The creek was pretty too, like liquid glass. The little girl noticed that no matter how fast the water moved, it held her shadow like a mirror holds a reflection. At least she thought it was her shadow that the water held. Soon enough the little girl started to wonder. Because the shadow on the water called to her—”

“A siren’s call,” I said.

“The girl answered it, of course. She was a child of prophecy. What else could she do? She strained toward the shadow...”

Twin memories of the bridge intertwined in my mind—the little girl leaning forward to watch the fish, and Janice Ravenwood staring down at the water as if hypnotized during the strange séance.

“...and the shadow’s voice begged her to come closer...”

I caught Janice Ravenwood before she fell into that cold, clear water.

But no one caught Circe Whistler.

“...and the little girl fell off the bridge and the shadows pulled her under the surface like liquid glass and the creek took her under the bridge and over rocks that never saw the sun...oh, so many rocks...and what those rocks did to her....”

Circe slapped me again. My eyelids fluttered open. “Don’t sleep yet, darling,” she said. “Stay with me a little while longer. There’s not much more to tell.”

Another breath rattled down my throat. Another old man’s birthday. I’d lost count, but I knew there wasn’t any point in starting again.

Circe said, “The rocks hurt her horribly. The little girl died, of course. But her wounds did not matter, for they would pass as she had passed. She was a child of prophecy, a husk to be emptied and repaired by Satan.” Circe leaned close and whispered in my ear as if we were in church. “*And the ruin of Whistler’s corpse shall be Satan’s cradle, and Satan will be reborn in flesh and blood to walk the earth once more—*”

“Circe was Satan’s vessel,” I whispered. “She was the chosen one. Not Diabolos—”

“Yes,” she said. “A little girl was Satan’s cradle, and He walks the earth as a woman.”

I coughed blood.

The thing that had once been Circe Whistler ran a long slim finger over

my lower lip and silenced me.

She slipped that finger between black lips and sucked it hungrily. A dark buzzing filled her throat, and her words were like a misplaced echo. “Diabolos Whistler’s prophecy was fulfilled a long time ago. The funny thing is, no one seemed to notice.”

Blood pooled in my mouth. Rich and salty and hot, pumped by my heart. Like life itself...like—

She leaned toward me.

Opened her mouth.

Kissed me deeply.

Drinking my blood like sustenance. Feeding the dark things that hid in the hollow of her throat—

I screamed.

She broke off the kiss. “Mortality.” She laughed. “It’s been a real tradeoff. Of course, everything is. I wouldn’t want to carry the whole load, though. I wouldn’t want to grow old, or give up certain advantages I’ve always enjoyed. But it’s like they say—sometimes you’ve got to bring it to get it. I paid a high price to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. Higher than you would ever believe.”

But I did believe. I had to. Satan had shown me the proof.

I believed every word.

I blinked and tried to focus. I looked for the woman who had drawn me to her bed. I looked for her in the shadows. She was with them now. A thing that wore a woman as a mask. A dark ripple on water. A siren calling from the heart of my wildest dream—

My wildest nightmare.

“It’s past your bedtime,” said the thing that lived in Circe Whistler’s skin.

I sucked down one last breath.

Her palm closed over my face, dammed my nostrils and my mouth.

That last breath burned in my lungs. I knew I’d never draw another. I drew my K-bar instead. Drew it from behind my back.

The blade sliced crushed velvet, tore flesh, skittered between ribs.

And dug a grave in Satan’s black heart.

* * *

They lay at my feet.

Three dead dogs and Satan's corpse.
Her blue eyes shone with surprise.
Her open mouth was a gutter for blood.
In dying, that was all she had surrendered.
Or perhaps it was all I could see.
No shade. No ghost. Only blood.
But blood was enough.
Flies came.
And flies lingered.
So did I.

* * *

I heard footfalls on the staircase. Careful, quiet, afraid. And very much alive.

Janice Ravenwood stood before me, searching for answers in my eyes.
My eyes held nothing. I was dead. But I saw clearly. I saw Janice's future. She could have everything she'd ever wanted. Fame, fortune...even Circe Whistler's mansion. She could have it all, as long as she was willing to pay the price.

We all paid our prices. All of us, the living and the dead. Me, and Diabolos Whistler, and the thing that had masqueraded as his daughter, and Spider Ripley and all the rest.

Janice Ravenwood was no different.

I remembered what she'd told me, once upon a time: "*A wise soul understands the dynamics of mercy.*"

I wondered if Janice truly believed that, for even mercy has its price.

"I don't know if you can hear me," she said. "But I want to tell you that I'm sorry. For everything. I didn't know about Circe until tonight.... When she told me what she was, I thought it was too late for any of us...especially for me. I hope you believe me."

Sirens howled in the distance.

Janice's fingers brushed my forehead.

"Thank you," she said.

She closed my eyelids with fingers that felt too much. She knew the price of a single touch. She paid it.

* * *

I left Circe Whistler's mansion under a ripe moon.

The storm was clearing. Tattered clouds whipped across the heavens, but there was no power left in them. The wind took the clouds where it wanted to go, blustering through the long night and beyond.

I could not go with the wind.

I looked to the road ahead.

A pair of gates swung open before me.

Not the gates of heaven, and not the gates of hell.

Only the gates that shielded the Whistler estate from the outside world.

A car from the sheriff's department raced down the driveway.

Instinctively, I made a grab for my K-bar, and the laughter that spilled across my lips didn't even amount to a whisper on the wind.

I held the knife before me. Just like the deputy I'd murdered at the side of Circe's house—the one who'd aimed a ghostly pistol in my direction—I could see the weapon clearly.

But I wouldn't be fooled by it. I tucked the knife under my belt. The patrol car skidded to a stop beneath the porte-cochere. Two deputies jumped out, and Janice Ravenwood met them at the door, and they entered the mansion together.

I turned my back on the mansion and started toward the open gates.

I didn't know where I was bound.

Heaven. Hell. Somewhere in between.

But I knew where I wanted to go.

I started up the road. Another police car came down the drive, followed by a CNN news van.

This time, I didn't spare them a backward glance.

Car doors opened behind me, then slammed shut.

Radio crosstalk drifted through the night air, along with insistent voices.

The talk was of a killer.

They'd given him a name, the way they always do. They called him Jehovah's Hammer.

2

She was waiting, of course.

Sitting on a footbridge that arched across a rushing creek, her little girl legs dangling over the side as she gazed down at the cold water rushing below.

I moved toward her, following a fern-choked path through old redwoods, but Circe Whistler didn't notice me.

Of course, the sounds I made were hardly sounds at all, and what the little girl would have heard had she been listening was masked by the hollow sigh of clear creek water flowing to the sea.

Silent as an evening breeze, I stepped onto the bridge.

"I always keep my promises," I said.

Circe looked up with startled blue eyes that were as clear as the October sky.

A smile bloomed on her face. "I'm glad you came back," she said.

"So am I."

I sat down next to her, and Circe looked into my eyes. She saw nothing there to make her wary or afraid. But she was afraid of questions, questions she had to ask.

Questions are never good. She said, "Did you find out—"

"The truth?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I did," I said. "Later, I'll tell you everything."

"Promise?"

"I promise," I said.

We sat in silence, in shadows beneath heavy redwood bowers. Somewhere above the sun was rising, but we could not see it, and we could not feel its warmth.

"Look!" I said.

A steelhead shot through the water like a bullet, fighting the current every inch of the way. A flash of scale like living sunshine, a splash of the steelhead's dark and powerful tail, and then it was gone.

I stared down at the dark water, rushing so fast, and at the shadows that waited there.

The shadows didn't move at all.

I drew the K-bar from behind my back.

The knife wasn't what it had been. I knew that.

Maybe now it was something different.

My fingers parted. The blade started down.

Gleaming like a steelhead swimming upstream to die.

The K-bar sliced through the shadows without the slightest splash, and then it was gone.

The water gleamed like silver.

“Will you stay with me?” Circe asked.

“I’ll stay.”

The creek whispered below, the soothing sound of water rushing to the
sea.

Circe reached out and took my hand.

THE END

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